

The Prayer of Jabez

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper
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The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life (Multnomah Publishers, 2000) by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson has gained a unique popularity in Christian and secular communities. When it was released, it sold 3.5 million in just four months and was selected as the 2001 Book of the Year and awarded the prestigious Gold Medallion Book Award by The Evangelical Christian Publishers Association.

It was selling quickly to hundreds of thousands of Christians across the country and becoming the top book used in small group studies. It has also been recommended as life changing by *Focus on the Family*. In fact Dr. Dobson wrote what he termed was the most important letter he had ever written to explain how this book had helped shape the future of his ministry. Other strong supporters are Chuck Colson, and Dr. Howard Hendricks.

The book also maintained a first-place ranking on many national bestseller lists and has sold over 9 million copies while drawing both criticism and acclaim. You can get the prayer printed on everything from hats, cups, and T-shirts all the way to a compact disc of “Jabez songs” art objects and framed posters. These were followed by the best selling *Prayer of Jabez for Teens*, *Prayer of Jabez for Kids*, *Prayer of Jabez for Little Ones*, *Prayer of Jabez Devotional books*, etc.

The excitement and popularity it has created in the Christian community leads to a close evaluation of this remarkable phenomenon.

The prayer

The Prayer of Jabez is a book that proclaims the blessings derived from reciting an obscure prayer buried in a genealogy in 1 Chronicles. In the New King James Version favored by Dr. Wilkinson, it reads:

“Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!’ So God granted him what he requested.” (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

That’s all there is to it, just two verses that include the prayer and all the Bible has to say about Jabez. Now, this small book has prompted millions of believers and unbelievers alike to memorize and repeat *the prayer*, often many times every day.

The person

The author is Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, a well respected, evangelical Bible teacher, founder of Walk thru the Bible Ministries, and a board member of Promise Keepers. He began Walk thru the Bible as a seminary student and now hosts more than 2,500 Bible conferences every year, with the purpose of training Christians to understanding the basic flow and content of both the Old and New Testaments.

The purpose of the book is clearly stated in the Preface, *“I want to teach you to pray a daring prayer that God always answers.”* This sums up the book and also sums up our concern. Is the author actually saying he has found a prayer that God always answers in the affirmative?

Dr. Wilkinson writes, *“This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by his power.”* (Page 7) In fact, he expresses throughout the book that Christians need to repeatedly pray this prayer, if they expect to receive great blessings and supernatural change in their lives. He also credits the physical expansion of his own ministry to his personal praying of this prayer daily.

The story of *The Prayer of Jabez* began when Dr. Wilkinson was in his last year at Dallas Theological Seminary seeking what God wanted him to do. He was influenced by a message given by one of his professors using the prayer of Jabez as a text. Let Dr. Wilkinson tell the story,

“I picked up my Bible and read verse ten--the prayer of Jabez. Something in his prayer would explain the mystery. It had to. Pulling a chair up to the yellow counter, I bent over my Bible, and reading the prayer over and over, I searched with all my heart for the future God had for someone as ordinary as I.

The next morning, I prayed Jabez’s prayer word for word. And the next. And the next. Thirty years later, I haven’t stopped.

If you were to ask me what sentence--other than my prayer for salvation--has revolutionized my life and ministry the most, I would tell you that it was the cry of a . . . Jabez, who is still remembered not for what he did, but for what he prayed and for what happened next.” (Page 11)

He claims to have now prayed *the prayer* word for word for thirty years. But does he really encourage readers to do the same as he does? Yes!

The last chapter of the book is titled “Making Jabez Mine.” The author gives steps that a person should follow including, *“praying the Jabez prayer every morning, taping it in your Bible, in your day-timer, on your bathroom mirror, or some other place where you’ll be reminded of your new vision, and rereading the book once each week while asking God to show you important insights you may have missed”* (Pages 86-87). In fact, throughout the book he constantly points to the need for all Christians to continually pray this prayer in order to experience success and blessing in their lives.

The positive

The Prayer of Jabez discusses the important place of prayer in the Christian life. All Christians should pray. Jesus set the example, taught his disciples, and commanded us to persevere and pray without ceasing. The book does emphasize the need of praying.

It also encourages Christians to focus on prayer for spiritual blessing, expanded outreach, guidance, and protection from evil, all things touched on in the pattern prayer Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 6.

Unlike many modern books on prayer, *The Prayer of Jabez* does not claim that we can receive anything we desire by praying if we only have enough faith. It points out that prayer needs to be in concert with God's desires and prayed from a proper motive.

These benefits are overshadowed by serious confusion the book creates.

The problem of presumption

The book opens the door for Christians and non-Christians to make the presumption that God must answer this prayer. Dr. Wilkinson writes,

"Dear Reader, I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief--only one sentence with four parts--and tucked away in the Bible, but I believe it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God . . . Thousands of believers who are applying its truths are seeing miracles happen on a regular basis. Will you join me for a personal exploration of Jabez? I hope you will!"
(Page 7)

So, what's the problem? The problem is that this book promises rewards from God that God doesn't promise in the Bible. It is true that God hears the prayers of His saints, but there is no guarantee that He will always answer them in a way consistent with our desires. Suggesting that God will always answer the prayer of Jabez is misleading.

The preface of the book implies that God not only always answers this prayer, but His answer is always "yes." Then what happens if God doesn't answer when we pray *the prayer*?

First, God does not honor the desires and requests of those who don't know Him (Isaiah 59:1-2). But there is no presentation of the gospel in the book and no differentiation between believer and non-believer.

For believers, there could also be other reasons for God's silence as well, such as our own unconfessed sin (Psalm 66:18), or impure motives (James 4:3-4), or our need to learn *humility, surrender, obedience and faith based on Scriptures* before we excel in what he calls "*daring prayers.*" "*The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*" (James 5:16).

The Bible is clear, God considers the heart attitude as we pray to be more important than the words.

Secondly, what if God's plan for a person is different from what they asked for in prayer? The book repeated claims that God will *always* answer the "Jabez" prayer. This oversimplifies and warps all that God's Word says about prayer.

Question: How can anyone assure anonymous readers that God "*always answers*" this particular prayer?

The problem of pride

Is the purpose of prayer to put God to work for us? Does the Bible even suggest that we as God's people have the authority and power to put the prayer of Jabez to work? "*Discover how to release the miraculous power of God in your life! ...See what God will do for you when you put Jabez' prayer to work!*" (See ad at Christianbook.com).

It is claimed that millions have testified to miraculous answers to the prayer that demonstrate God's response to people who seek Him. But do these amazing stories prove that God "*always answers*" this specific prayer or verify that the prayer "*contains the key*" to extraordinary favor with God?

This begins to sound like the teaching of the modern prosperity theology so prevalent in visual and print media today. The author promises us that it doesn't, so we must ask, "Is that assessment fair?" Just look at the book:

Immediately before claiming that the prayer is "*not asking for more of what we could get for ourselves,*" and that Jabez, "*left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessing would be,*" comes the statement, "*Is it possible that God wants your to be 'selfish' in your prayers?*" (Page 19)

The answer provided is yes, based on an extrapolation of the Jabez story far beyond information reported in Scripture.

Directly after the disclaimer comes this, "*If Jabez had worked on Wall Street, he might of prayed, 'Lord, increase my investment portfolios.'*" (Page 31) And this is followed by instructions to Christian businessmen that God is just waiting for their prayer to increase their business. This certainly makes God's will easy to accept, since he says God wants us to be successful.

The Jabez prayer seems to grant access to success and a God who uses His awesome supernatural force in order to increase our personal and professional development.

"*When we seek God's blessing as the ultimate value in life, we are throwing ourselves entirely into the river of His will and power and purposes for us.*" "*Let me tell you a guaranteed by-product of sincerely seeking His blessing: Your life will become marked by miracles.*" (Page 24) When did God's blessing and miracles become the ultimate purposes of life?

The author also presents the thought that God has untold blessings waiting for us,

but we never get them because we never ask for them. (Pages 17, 25-27) This is the exact same philosophy that consistently draws crowds to modern prosperity ministries.

Question: How can seeking God's blessing be presented as the ultimate value in life?

The problem of prescription

The Prayer of Jabez simplifies the discipline of prayer by making the words of the prayer into a formula. The book encourages Christians to repeat the words of Jabez's prayer every day, day after day. (Pages 86- 87)

Prayer is not a prescription to be filled by God; in fact, Jesus spoke strongly against that kind of rote prayer style in Matthew 6:7, "*And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words.*" Repeating this prayer daily may cause Christians to see prayer as a mystical ritual rather than personal communication with God.

One critic asked a good question, "*Might some readers be seeking the power of prayer rather than the power of God?*" It is much easier to memorize and repeat a formula prayer that "works" rather than take time to seek to know the heart of God through a study of the Scriptures.

This presentation of prayer is not unlike the repetitious prayers and mantras of the world's largest religions. A small book given to thousands of people who attended a May 2001 "Medicine Buddha Empowerment" workshop led by the Dalai Lama stated:

"To recite the Medicine Buddha Mantra brings inconceivable merit. ... If you recite the mantra every day, the Buddhas and bodhisattvas will always pay attention to you, and they will guide you. All your negative karmas will be pacified and you will never be born in the three lower realms.... and all your wishes are fulfilled."

God has wonderful plans for us that include not only blessing but also buffeting (see James 1) and lead to perseverance and ultimately to spiritual maturity. Virtually all the apostles experienced the expansion of their ministry but they also died a martyr's death.

Question: Do we really believe that rote repetition adds strength to a prayer? If so, as Jesus taught, we may be trusting in mere words more than your sovereign God.

The problem of pattern

The Prayer of Jabez raises questions about the value of other prayers in the Bible, and their place in a believer's life. The only prayer defined as a model prayer is Jesus' prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. Most of the Evangelical Church would be slow to attribute miraculous powers to the repetitious praying of even the "Lord's Prayer."

There is tremendous value in studying prayers throughout the Bible as patterns to follow. We can imitate the prayers of Moses, David, Paul, Peter, John, and other Old and New Testament saints. But, the supernatural power of God worked through their lives because they believed God, dedicated their lives to Him, humbled themselves, and sought and do His will, not because of the words they said.

Focusing solely on Jabez's prayer can assign an inherent magical capability to unlock the power of God that it and no other prayer possesses. The men of God mentioned above loved His Word and sought His will. They did not engage in vain repetition.

Both the prayer of Jabez and the "Lord's Prayer" were pleasing to our Father but their differences are important. Jabez focused on God's gifts. Jesus emphasized the Giver. Jabez' prayer reflects the Old Testament context where God demonstrated His love by prospering His people. The Lord's Prayer reflects the New Testament understanding that -- because of the cross -- we share in the life, suffering, ministry and triumphs of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Question: How can the prayer of Jabez, or any other prayer, be used as more than a patter for prayer in light of the teaching of the Scriptures?

The problem of precision

Whenever a person speaks or writes about an element of the Christian life using Scripture to support his position he needs to take great care in "cutting the Word straight," presenting accurately what the text says.

In the January-March 2002 issue of the theological quarterly of Dr. Wilkinson's alma mater, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dr. Roy B. Zuck, Professor Emeritus of Bible Exposition and Editor of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, expresses several concerns in this matter of Biblical interpretation.

The first concern has to do with Jabez's name. Dr Zuck writes,

"In Hebrew," Wilkinson writes, "the word for Jabez means 'pain'" (p. 9).

This is wrong, for the Hebrew word for Jabez is a pun on the word for pain. "Pain translates OZEB, not JABEZ. "Jabez" and "pain" are not the same words at all; they only sound similar because the two consonants Z and B in "pain" are reversed in the word "Jabez." . . . Since she (his mother) had had a difficult delivery, she used a word play to help people . . . remember her experience.

Thus it is incorrect to suggest that he lived a life of pain and was "weighed down by the sorrow of his past and the dreariness of his present" (p. 22). Such a suggestion goes beyond the Scriptures.

The second concern deals with one of the main concepts of the book, the extending of ministry. Dr. Zuck writes,

The book also misinterprets the second petition of Jabez. “Enlarge my borders” (NASB) is rendered in the New International Version and the New King James (Wilkinson quotes the latter) “enlarge my territory.” Wilkinson says Jabez “wanted more influence, more responsibility, more opportunity to make a mark for the God of Israel” (p. 30, emphasis his). Wilkinson also writes that to pray for enlarged territory means to pray for more “opportunities” and “impact,” “more ministry,” “more influence and responsibility with which to honor Him,” or “more ministry and influence for Him” (pp. 32, 36, 41, 82).

Where in the Bible is there any hint that Jabez wanted to expand his ministry? What ministry? Since the word “territory” means land, he was asking for more real estate (though Wilkinson asserts otherwise; (p.30). Is it not unsound interpretation and application to take a word for property and make it mean ministry or influence?

The third concern has to do with the fourth request of Jabez. Dr. Zuck continues writing,

The New King James Version renders Jabez’s fourth petition, “and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain” (v. 10).

However, the word for “evil” can also mean “harm,” as the New American Standard Bible and the New international Version translate it. Sometimes the word means evil in the moral sense, but other times it means physical calamity or adversity. Possibly Jabez was simply asking for freedom from physical hardships.

The New King James Version renders the last line of the prayer as if the Hebrew verb were casual in form (“that I may not cause pain”). The Hebrew, however, may more accurately be rendered, “that it may not pain me.” (The verb form is Qal, not the casual Piel or Hiphil.) Understood in this way, Jabez was asking that he be kept from afflictions so that they would not bring him pain, rather than that he not cause pain.

Careful observation of the plain literal sense of the Biblical text considerably alters the meaning of the principles that are the cornerstone of the books claims.

Question: Is it safe to create an entire belief system involving an area as important as prayer based on faulty exegesis of Scripture?

The problem of practice

The Prayer of Jabez paints an unrealistic picture of the true Christian life. It strongly claims that praying Jabez’s prayer leads to a life of incredible blessing and ever-increasing ministry opportunities and, in fact, allows for no suffering or struggle.

Dr. Bruce Wilkinson concludes his book by saying, “*Join me for that transformation. You will change your legacy and bring supernatural blessings wherever you go. God*

will release His miraculous power in your life now. And for all eternity, He will lavish on you His honor and delight.” (Page 91)

Even though he disavows a prosperity outlook, there is no reference made to the struggles of real Christian living and the part prayer plays in facing that struggle and remaining true to God in the crucible of life. *The Prayer of Jabez* fails to exhibit biblical balance that includes living faithfully in the common occurrences of daily life and glorifying God in day-to-day attitudes and actions. Is Christian living all miracles and astounding ministry opportunities? Of course not!

While mentioning “*ordinary, easy-to-overlook people*” listed in *Hebrews 11* who won honor from God” (Page 77), he fails to mention the faithful men and women who received the opposite of honor and blessing in this world:

“...others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ({men} of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.” (Hebrews 11:35-38)

In fact, God shows us that suffering and persecution, not prosperity, power or influence, is a normal part of our life in Christ. We cannot be one with Jesus without sharing His battles as well as triumphs. Jesus Himself said, “*If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you;... because they do not know the One who sent Me.*” (John 15:20-21) And Paul, perhaps the most successful minister in history said, “*For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,*” (Philippians 1:29)

Or how about this for reality gospel:

“But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves; {we are} afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.” (2 Corinthians 4:7-11)

Formula prayer can raise false expectations of what God is obliged to do and therefore bring disappointment, doubt and disillusionment rather than faith and thankfulness? If we are one with Jesus, we should set our hearts, not on blessings in the world, but on fellowship with our Lord.

Countless saints and martyrs have relinquished earthly successes, comforts and popularity for a far greater eternal treasure. Paul said it well,

“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and

count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from {the} Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which {comes} from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings,... being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

“Not that I have already obtained {it} , or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of {it} yet; but one thing {I do} : forgetting what {lies} behind and reaching forward to what {lies} ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:7-14)

Question: How can the blessing and success of life ministries be presented without the fact of persecution and suffering?

The problem of presentation

Dr. Wilkinson has chosen a style of presentation that makes it seem as if he’s offering a cause and effect relationship with God. You pray to him and he’ll make you rich, but to be fair, he also says that the Jabez prayer requires an acceptance of God’s will, whatever its form, not the presentation of an itemized demand.

However, since the book is filled without exception with success, and since the vast majority of the testimonies both in and outside the book, are stories of success, the balance is sorely lacking. And moreover, testimonies focus on the book and *the* prayer, not on reading the Bible, nor on praying more, nor on building a more intimate relationship with God. People have found the magic words that bring blessings into their lives. This is the problem with repetitive, rote praying.

The closing statement in *The Prayer of Jabez* says, “*Just by looking at what is happening, I can assure you that God still answers those who have a loyal heart and pray the Jabez prayer.*” (Page 90)

This thought permeates the book. “*How do I know that it will significantly impact you? Because of my experience and the testimony of hundreds of others around the world with whom I’ve shared these principles. Because, even more importantly, the Jabez prayer distills God’s powerful will for your future.* (Pages 11-12)

Dr. Wilkinson treats the prayer as something special in and of itself. It has inherent power and activates God’s powerful will. And the proof of this assertion is not from the teaching of Scripture, but on the basis of subjective experiences. This is a dangerous precedent for doctrinal truth.

Question: Does any prayer, object, or person other than God have any inherent power to bring blessing to any believer, let alone an unbeliever?

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Prayer of Jabez* could be a helpful tool if it encourages Christians to look to Jabez's prayer as one of many biblical models of prayer worthy of emulation. You can look to Jabez's prayer along with the prayers of other Bible characters in an effort to better inform your own prayer life.

However, by his choice of approach and illustrations, Dr. Wilkinson presents the prayer and promises that if you take the steps, it will result in unbelievable, supernatural success within days.

Those steps require remarkably little or no effort:

Step one—Ask for God's great blessing and He is bound to bless you

Step two—Ask and God will enlarge your territory (Grant you success)

Step three—Ask and God will bring a touch of Greatness to your life

Step four—Ask and God will keep you from temptation and the Devil

Just pray *the prayer!*

But remember, true prayer does not consist of a set of mantras, or incantations, or even wonderful Biblical prayers, memorized and then employed to elicit a particular response from God.

We dare not presume that God is bound to answer a memorized and oft repeated prayer just because it is in the Bible.

We dare not be so proud as to believe that we as God's people have the authority and power to put God to work for us through rote prayers.

We dare not look at prayer as a prescription for solving all our problems and moving us into an exciting, "successful," mystical life.

We dare not value the pattern of the prayer of Jabez over the pattern set by other prayers presented in Scripture.

We dare not forsake precision in handling a portion of Scripture in order to support a principle that seems to work in our own experience.

We dare not ignore the true practice of Christian living by ignoring the call to holiness and suffering as well as the call to service.

We dare not focus on the presentation of *the prayer* and neglect reading the Bible, conversing personally and increasing our intimacy with God.

Instead we must realize that prayer is about aligning our minds and hearts with God's sovereign purposes, even in suffering or in service. Prayer is a conversation with the one who loved us and bought us at great cost.

Dr. John Mac Arthur made this comment in regard to *The Prayer of Jabez*,

“Prayer is a rich privilege God graciously grants to His children, enabling us to express our submission to His will for our lives. To that end, may we all learn to pray with the humility, dependence, and expectation of blessing Jabez exhibited.”

We acknowledge that our Father is a loving God who wants to bless us abundantly, but it is more often our heart condition rather than not asking that stands in the way of what God wishes to do in and through us.

But we fear that the fad of continually praying the Jabez prayer will move people away from seeking a personal relationship with God and aligning their will with His.

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