

The Prayer of Jabez

June 2001

For several weeks now, a Christian book entitled *The Prayer of Jabez*, has dominated the bestseller lists of the country. Written by Bruce Wilkinson, founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, the book's subtitle promises to help us in "breaking through to the blessed life." According to the book, the key to an exceptional life is found in a brief passage in I Chronicles 4: 9-10: Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request. (NIV)

Despite extraordinary sales figures, the reviews of the book have varied widely. While it is heavily endorsed and promoted by stalwarts such as James Dobson, a statement by the conservative LCMS denomination cautions, "...The Prayer of Jabez is a particularly dangerous work from a Christian theological perspective." The truth of the matter is that the book is a mixed bag. It combines good and noble sentiment with a bad and sloppy use of the Bible. Its general premise is that we should actively seek out opportunities to be used by God and to expect extraordinary things as we pray for those opportunities. It also promotes consistent prayer as a chief means to approaching this goal.

All of this is commendable and worthy of applause for there is probably nobody who would not benefit from considering these points. On the other hand, it is the way the book gets to these points that is the problem. I am always greatly distressed to see popular books promoting poor scriptural interpretation and a general disregard for what the Bible says. This book does this very thing in a number of ways: 1. One of the principles of Biblical interpretation is that we must take care when we use historical narratives as didactic (teaching) passages. Wilkinson has taken a narrative description of Jabez and his prayer and made it prescriptive. The writer of Chronicles tells us that Jabez prayed to God for personal prosperity and that God granted his request. It does not instruct us to pray this prayer or that this specific prayer is the key to "breaking through," or anything else. For Wilkinson to tell us the key lies in repeating this prayer many times is silly. Why not Job's prayer, or Nehemiah's or any number of other prayers recorded in the Bible? 2. Secondly, Wilkinson allegorizes the prayer. Jabez prayed for more wealth and to not have any pain. Wilkinson makes this a prayer for spiritual prosperity, that there be more opportunities to serve God. Again the sentiment may be correct, but the scripture is being misused, as if we can assign meaning to scripture when it suits our purpose. 3. Wilkinson tends to substitute technique for truth. If only you use this technique God has to honor it. In fact the preface to the book tells us that it will teach us to "pray a prayer that God always answers." Since God answers all prayer, the assertion here seems to be that God must answer this prayer in the positive. Wilkinson promises the "key to extraordinary favor with God," and it turns out to be this one small passage in I Chronicles 4:9. However, there is no magic technique. Jesus specifically warns against repetitious prayer as a means of grabbing God's

attention. 4. One of Wilkinson's premises is that "Jabez was more honorable" than others and this was the key to his favor with God. Yet the most probable translation from the Hebrew is that, "Jabez was more honored than his brothers." This difference in translation makes much of Wilkinson's case incorrect.

Why is any of this important? Because as evangelicals, we believe the Bible to be the very words of God. Yet books like this treat the Bible as a collection of speakers' quotes that can be used to illustrate the points we wish to make. So despite the good intent of this book, its popularity makes me weep for evangelicalism's casual disrespect of God's word. Save your money and buy a good book on hermeneutics.

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