

*The Prayer of Jabez*  
 I Chronicles 4:10  
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 First Federated Church  
 Peoria, Illinois  
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When Bruce Wilkerson was a seminary senior he and his wife Darlene spent quite a lot of time thinking, talking and praying about the next chapter of their lives. One day he recalled something that the campus chaplain had said to him.

“If you want a bigger vision for your life, then sign up to be a ‘gimper’ for God.” Wilkinson was puzzled.

“What’s a ‘gimper?’”

A “gimper,” the chaplain explained, is someone who always does a little more than what is required or expected.

Throughout the years Wilkinson recalled those words and strived to be a “gimper for God.” That is what led him to I Chronicles. The first nine chapters of the Old Testament book is nothing more than an extensive genealogy of the Hebrew people. Most people skip over it.

(Daren may have wished that he could have in this morning’s Scripture reading—but in all seriousness, I asked him if he was okay reading all of the difficult names; I don’t think that I would have been, but he was a good sport!).

Right in the middle of the genealogy, though, the writer takes a break and makes an editorial comment. *Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had 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.*

We know very little about Jabez. We know that he was “more honorable than his brothers.” We know that his name means “Sorrowful,” but we have no idea why his mother named him “Sorrowful.”

Wilkinson was drawn to Jabez, because it was said “God granted his request.” A few years ago Wilkinson turned his insights into a small best selling book simply called The Prayer of Jabez.

This morning, as a part of this month’s sermon series based on the theme of prayer, we will look more closely at his prayer. But we must do so with one caveat; it is all there is to say on the subject.

That is why we looked at Romans 8—“We don’t know how to pray as we ought.”

That is why Pastor Hofmann explored the Psalms with us.

That is why last week we looked at the Lord’s Prayer as a pattern prayer rather than an incantation.

And that is why next week we will look at some general principles that Jesus gave us in what is called His Sermon on the Mount.

The Prayer of Jabez is on the cover of our bulletin and you can easily follow along, if you wish, as we briefly explore each of its four petitions.

The first petition is *Oh, that You would bless me indeed*. Blessings, in Scripture are not *primarily* about things.

You may recall that part of the conflict between Jacob and Esau was that Jacob stole Esau’s blessing by tricking their aging blind father into giving him Esau’s blessing; the blessing the rightfully belonged to the first born.

No, biblical blessings are not temporal, though they may be partially manifested in that form *but beware, because temporal blessings are the most spiritually troublesome*.

“To whom much has been given,” Jesus warned, “much is expected.”

And on another occasion he said, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy; and where thieves break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there will be your heart also. (Matthew 6: 19-20)

The blessing that Jabez prayed for was to have a “Kingdom Heart.” He wanted a heart like God. He wanted to do what God wants him to do. He wanted to be an agent of God’s Kingdom. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) said it best:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.*

**The second petition is to have his “territory enlarged.”** Once again, biblically, this is not to necessarily have more land but to have a greater sphere of influence.

Jean Monnet, the founder of the European Common Market, once observed that there are two kinds of people in life; those who want to *be*

somebody and those who want to *do* something. Jabez wanted to *do* something. He didn't want to live small.

*“(Living) small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, not just in some of us but all of us. And as we let our own lights shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”*

Jabez wanted to be a “Kingdom Builder.” He wanted more and more opportunities to serve the *True King*.

Not too long ago someone told me the story about one of their children. At the end of the day as they were getting ready for bed and saying their prayers their little one asked in all seriousness, “Daddy, why did God make me?” The father was a bit stumped and later asked me what he should have said. I slipped the question by asking what *he* had said and then replied, in my best “Family Feud” voice, “Good answer!”

I've thought about that little exchange a lot this past week. I'm not sure that the child is old enough to understand this but the reason why God made any of us is to give God pleasure. We were created to glorify God.

Whatever our gifts, whatever our education, whatever labor, our “calling”—our “vocation” is to do God's work while we are on this earth. So many of Jesus' parables point to the belief that when our days draw to a close we will be judged not by what we have but by what we have *done* or left undone. In Eternity the one with the most toys *doesn't win*.

In reflecting upon this petition, Wilkinson noted that the most exhilarating times in his life have been when he was bold in doing the work of God's Kingdom. He has found that when we set God's agenda ahead of our own, God intervenes in ways never imagined.

**The third petition is to have God's hand with him.** He is asking God to make him humble enough to be coachable, teachable.

A long time ago when we lived in Williamsburg, Iowa, the town square had a playground with three slides. One was quite small. I could stand beside it and hold my daughters' hands as they slid down the side. Another slide was a little higher but I could hold their hands until they reached the platform at the top. Then I would hurry around to the bottom of the slide to catch them. The third slide was a law suit waiting to happen. As a matter of fact, on our last visit to the park a few weeks ago I noticed that it was no longer there. This slide was probably 20 feet high and shaped like a corkscrew.

When my daughters first wanted to go down that slide they wanted me to go with them, to climb up the stairs behind them and to hold them on my lap for the ride down. Eventually, as they got older, as they grew, as they matured, they went down that slide alone but in the beginning, the slide was too high, too frightening to go down it alone.

It has been said that when we take little steps we don't need God. Jabez asked for big steps and he asked God to be with him when he took the big steps of a Kingdom worker.

**The last petition is to be kept from evil so that he does not cause pain to others or to himself.** There is an old commercial in which a gladiator is in a Roman arena with a hungry lion. As the lion comes at him the gladiator accidentally drops his sword. Panicked and with no time to pick it up again he begins to run. The lion quickly closes the gap and in mid-leap there is a freeze frame as an unseen announcer says, "Sometimes you can afford to come in second. Sometimes you can't."

Jabez understood that the surest way to keep from being eaten by life's lions is to stay out of the arena!

Life's biggest temptations often come on the heels of great success. In his book Success Is a Choice University of Louisville basketball coach Rick Pitano set out a ten step plan of attack for success in life.

The first step is to build your self-esteem. It is followed by setting demanding goals, always be positive, establish good habits, master the art of communication, learn from good role models, thrive on pressure, be persistent and learn from adversity. But do you know what the tenth step is? The tenth step is to "survive your own success."

"Pride cometh before the fall" Proverbs warns (16:18).

There is something about success that dulls our sense of dependence upon God. Like Little Jack Horner we sit in the corner eating our Christmas pie. We stick in our thumb and pull out a plum and say, "My, what a good boy am I!" We forget who it is that made the pie that we hold in the first place!

When Jesus taught his disciples to pray he did not tell them to pray for wealth, spiritual insights or special powers. He told them to pray to be kept from temptation. I think he did this because he learned first hand in his own wilderness temptation experience how hard it is not to lose your soul to material things, to power and to piety. He knew if we succumb to temptation then a part of us dies.

I suspect that Jabez knew the same thing.

