

PRAYER'S PRACTICALITY

by Ray C. Stedman

Our study this morning illustrates the very practical impact that prayer can have on a difficult and troubled life. I have the feeling that many of us will see ourselves very clearly in this little study, found in the fourth chapter of First Chronicles.

This is not a very familiar passage of Scripture, because it is one of those genealogies where we get lost in all the begats and begots. Nevertheless, it is a very insightful passage. Here in the midst of all the names that appear in the opening verses of Chapter 4, there is a sudden focus on one individual, and I want to call your attention to him. Verse 9:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying "Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me!" And God granted what he asked. {1 Chr 4:9-10 RSV}

After these verses the list of names resumes again. This brings to mind a camera scanning all these faces, moving rapidly from one face to another, until it suddenly zooms in and focuses on one individual, Jabez. This is God's way of calling attention to him. Though we have a brief account of who he was and what he did, the theme of this little story is that Jabez was a man who believed in prayer. His prayer is recorded for us as an outstanding example of a man whose life was changed by the power of prayer.

Many of you are acquainted with the fact that often in the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament, these little gems suddenly appear. They call for careful study, because certain clues are always given which, if followed through, will begin to unfold the meaning of the story and the reason why it is included in the Scriptures. This is one of those stories.

As you look at this account, it is evident that there is something wrong in the life of Jabez; some shadow has fallen across his path:

1. We are given the first clue along that line in these words, "Jabez was more honorable than his brothers." We do not know how many brothers he had, but that account says something more about the brothers than it does about Jabez. When we read that he was more honorable than they, that indicates something of the dishonor that was attached to their character. So the first thing we know about Jabez is that he is of a family that has a bad reputation; and that reputation is recorded here for us to the extent that Jabez is regarded as a remarkable exception to a rather dishonorable family.
2. The second thing we learn about him is that, when he was born, his mother named him "Pain," or "Sorrow." That is a strange name to give to a newborn baby, but the mother's remark was, "I named him this because I bore him in sorrow, or pain." That remark could, of course, be referring to the pain of childbirth, but I doubt if that is what it means. If that were true it would mean that every baby born in pain ought to be named "Jabez," so it would be the most popular name ever, if that were the case. Jabez had several brothers, we do not know how many, who were probably born in pain of childbirth too, but this indicates that something else was troubling the mother when Jabez was born. She was discouraged, she saw nothing ahead but hopeless difficulty, and she named the baby "Pain," or "Sorrow," because of that experience.

Then if you look a little closer, you will notice some omissions which are clues to what is going on. All through the chapter these other names are the names of heads of families -- so-and-so is the father of so-and-so, etc. -- but suddenly Jabez is introduced, with no mention at all of his father; no paternity, no inheritance, no heritage are mentioned. When you consider that these records in the Book

of Chronicles were undoubtedly taken from the official registry of the temple (most scholars recognize this) you realize that here is an official account of who was who in the land of Israel. Jabez is introduced, however, not because of his father's name or anything about his father.

3. Furthermore, it is evident from this account that there was a struggle going on in the family of Jabez. They seemed to be under the blight of terrible poverty, for Jabez prays, "Lord, enlarge my border," i.e., increase my material possessions. This indicates that something was amiss in this regard. Now when you remember that, in Israel, the land had been divided among the tribes and among the families by lot, that every family had its own inheritance which was passed on from generation to generation, you know that this inheritance was prized as being the great possession of the family. The law of Jubilee required that every fifty years any land which had been sold, or lost in any way, was to be restored to its original owner, yet here is Jabez, recorded without an inheritance, with no mention of his father's name, and with the additional information that his brothers were a dishonorable lot.

Now I suggest that this is telling us something very significant about Jabez. We have to fill in with our imagination what has gone on, but it is very likely that here is an account of someone whose inheritance has been squandered by the irresponsibility and dissolution of his father, gambled away perhaps, or lost in some crazy scheme which probably had some illegality about it, resulting in shame and disgrace coming upon the family. At any rate, Jabez's mother seems to feel hopeless, dispossessed, and gripped by very difficult circumstances. Jabez's brothers too seem to have inherited some kind of a family trait which has rendered them a proverb of shame in Israel. We can put all that together from the clues given.

4. One other thing is also given to us as a clue here. Jabez prays, "Oh that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me." Actually, his prayer is, "that thou might keep me from the harm, the evil, so that it might not pain me." There is a play on words here. "Hurt," or "pain," translate into the name "Jabez" again, so what he is praying, therefore, is, "Lord, whatever it is that is in me that is wrong, I pray that you will keep it from 'Jabez-ing' me -- from hurting me," because that seems to be his lot in life.

Put together, all of this gives us a picture of a young man who has all the cards stacked against him. He has a dissolute and irresponsible father whose name has been dropped from the official records because he has lost his family property in some shameful way; he feels within himself a taint, a weakness from his heredity which has touched his brothers and brought them to shame and disgrace in the eyes of the whole community; he has no property, no way to start earning a living, no way to attain to a position of honor or status in the community.

I do not know how many of you identify closely with Jabez, but since I discovered this little story in my Bible reading some twenty years ago, it has been a tremendous encouragement to me. My father abandoned our family when I was ten years old, and I still remember how deeply that touched me -- even more than I realized at the time. Though I was taken to live with my aunt and uncle, and, therefore, had some steady family life, I felt very keenly in my own spirit the loneliness of growing up without a Dad, and my envy of other boys who had fathers who could play with them, and talk with them, and guide them. More than that, I felt the shame that my father's abandonment had cast upon our family, and the poverty in which it left us, struggling to keep body and soul together, eating from hand to mouth through the days of the Depression. All of that left a sharp impression upon my spirit, so in reading this account I have felt very close to Jabez.

But, of course, the story would not even be here if it did not tell us that Jabez had found an answer; he knew where help was to be found. The remarkable thing about this little incident is this prayer that he prayed.

Again, we have to supply some of the details from our imagination. I cannot help but feel that Jabez's mother was probably a godly woman. You often find that kind of situation of a man who is blowing it, who is careless about his responsibility, living only for himself, yet he is married to a woman who stays at home, who tries to keep the family together, struggling valiantly against all the unhappiness and misery of poverty trying to teach her children something about God. At any rate, no matter where he learned this, Jabez learned that there was a God, and that he answered prayer.

It may be that he learned this from the national rituals of Israel. It is rather suggestive that here he refers to God

as "the God of Israel," the nation's God, the One who had committed himself to guide an obscure people through a trackless wilderness, to bring them out of slavery and bondage into a place of prominence and prosperity among the nations. Something about that, perhaps, had spoken to Jabez's heart, so he prayed this remarkable prayer.

Notice that even though the prayer is very personal, it is really not a selfish prayer. (There is a difference between being personal and being selfish.) Jabez uses the pronouns "me" or "my" five times in the prayer:

"Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me!" {1 Chr 4:10b RSV}

At first glance that looks like a very self-centered prayer. It sounds like that famous prayer of the man who prayed, "Bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more." But Jabez is really not being selfish, because he is praying for something God wanted him to have. That is the difference between being personal and being selfish.

There are personal requests in our Lord's model prayer: "Give us this day our daily bread; forgive us our trespasses; lead us not into temptation; deliver us from evil" {Matt 6:11-13} -- those are all personal, but they are not selfish. Selfish prayers are prayers which ask God for something he does not want us to have, at least not at that time, demanding prayers that are interested only in our own immediate welfare, for our own satisfaction. That is selfish praying. But God is a God of the individual. He promises great and mighty things to us personally that we may lay hold of, so to pray in this way is not selfish, but personal, as Jabez teaches us here.

Let us look a little more closely at these four requests. What is Jabez asking for?

Well, first he asks, "Oh, that thou wouldst bless me." What do you mean when you pray, "Bless me," "Bless my children," "Bless the missionaries," "Bless the translators of the Bible," or whatever? If you are like me, you use that phrase as a lazy way to escape thinking of anything more specific. But this phrase is often used in Scripture, and it is a proper prayer if we mean it.

So what do we mean by it? Well, it seems to me that it is a request for some kind of an inner sense of relationship with God. "Blessing" is drawing near to God, finding him, knowing him personally. To be close to God, to walk with him, to share in his life, to know his Spirit, to be filled with his wisdom and to understand his loving, forgiving heart, all this is part of "blessing," and this is what Jabez is praying for.

Somehow in this lonely, neglected boy's life there has come a deep sense of awareness that the key to life is to be loved and understood and appreciated, so this is what he is praying for. It is what we all ought to pray for. The New Testament tells us that if you do not have this deep sense that someone of great significance loves you, has accepted you, cherishes you, thinks highly of you, respects you and admires you, then you cannot handle life properly at all. You will feel lost, lonely and neglected, and you either react with anger and rebellion, or with self-pity and introspection. That is what Jabez is asking for. He does not, perhaps, understand all that he is asking, but he is praying, "Lord, first, above all else, let there be this consciousness that you are my God, that I belong to you and you belong to me." All of that is wrapped up in these words, "Bless me."

Then second, Jabez prays, "Enlarge my border." This is a prayer for opportunity, for the restoration, in his case, of his lost inheritance, for a place to stand in the midst of the culture of his day in which he might gain some sense of status and respect. Translated into our own terms, it means to find a way to break out of whatever may be limiting us, hemming us in and enslaving us. Some of you may feel this because you are in the grip of some habit, some attitude of mind and heart. Some of you may feel that you are in a situation in which you have no opportunity to grow, to advance, to be fulfilled and satisfied. If that is the case, this is the proper kind of prayer to pray, "Lord, give me that opportunity. Let me find it. Open the door for me." Jabez prays that earnestly because of his lost inheritance.

Then the third petition is, "Let thy hand be with me." What does he mean by that? Well, I am sure this is a prayer that comes naturally to his lips as he thinks of the uncertainty of the future he faces. All of us feel this way at times. We do not know what is coming down the road. We do not know what sudden, unexpected changes may occur in our lives in the next few days, months, or years. What we often want to ask for, therefore, is a revelation of what is coming, a glimpse ahead. That is why prophetesses, seers and psychics are so popular today, the Jeanne Dixon types who claim, at least, that they can look ahead and tell you what is going to happen to you. You can find magazines on any newsstand devoted to this business of trying to guess the future. If you carefully compare their success record, however, it is very weak. Most of them get it right only about 20% of the time, which is not much better than a good guess. Most of us could do about as well.

What we really need is not knowledge, but a guide. I have often been in strange cities where I had to go to a meeting someplace, but I did not know the way. I would have appreciated having a map or some way to get there, but what I appreciated much more was somebody calling me up or coming by, and saying, "Come with me. I know the way. I'll take you." That relieves my fears entirely. I hardly pay any attention to how to get there because the guide is leading me on. Now this is what Jabez is praying for: "Lord, be with me. Go into the future with me. Guide me that I may know that each step of the way I can trust the fact that you are with me, and if I need a touch of direction you will give it." There is a wonderful word of Paul's in the letter to the Philippians, where he says to these Christians, "If in any thing you be otherwise minded" (i.e., if you do not see things the way I am trying to set them out), "God will show it to you," {cf, Phil 3:15}. We do have a Guide. This is what Jabez's prayer recognizes.

Then the last request was, "Keep me from the evil so that it might not hurt me." I see in that request a deep awareness of a tainted heredity in this young man's life. Something he has inherited from his dissolute forebears has taken up residence in his own genetic makeup; he senses a weakness within that frightens him. I see this in many people. I feel it myself. It may be a tendency towards a hot temper, which destroys many opportunities that could be used for advantage, wrecked by a display of temper that turns everybody off and ruins everything. Maybe it is a lustful sexual life which constantly dwells on sexual themes so that the mind is continually bombarded with desires that race through the blood and awaken passions that ought to be subdued. Maybe it is avarice, some desire for the acquisition of material gain so that you will be safe and secure, have abundance, and do what you want. It is not for nothing that the Bible warns us, "The love of money is the root of all evil," {1 Tim 6:10 KJV}. Perhaps that is the weakness that is inside that Jabez fears. Whatever it was -- and the text does not tell us -- he knows that God is able to handle it.

Now I do not know anything more hopeful in all the Scriptures than that realization. Psychiatrists and psychologists tell us that the two great areas which lead us astray -- and the two great causes of crime in the world today -- are a bad environment and a tainted heredity. Here is a young man who has both, yet in the midst of his sense of weakness, of his sense of the impossibility of rising above his circumstances, his only recourse is to fall on his knees and cry to the God of Israel that he would have mercy upon him and grant him these four desires.

I do not think he prayed this prayer just once, glibly, on a Sunday afternoon. It is the kind of prayer that comes again and again to human lips if you really are concerned about where you are, and you recognize how impossible, how difficult the situation looks from the human standpoint. This is the time to lay hold of the formula which Jabez found and which God used to bring him out of his circumstances.

That brings us to the last word we have here in this passage about Jabez: "And God granted what he asked." That is all that is recorded. God did it. I do not think Jabez experienced any kind of special angelic appearance to reassure him. There is no account of any voice from heaven or any warming glow even from within to give him the promise that God had heard and was going to answer. What I think doubtless occurred was that, as Jabez went on, he found doors opening suddenly, unexpectedly. Opportunity was given for him to buy a little piece of land, perhaps, and to raise a crop on it. More money was given him, perhaps, and he was able at last to restore his lost patrimony, to gain back the family inheritance. Gradually, as he did so, he established for himself a reputation for honesty and fair dealings with others. Though his brothers had a bad name in the community, Jabez gradually earned a name of respect and honor until one day, looking back on his life, he suddenly became aware that God had answered all his requests. He had been with him, brought him through, delivered him, opened the door and set him free.

I do not know whether this happens to you or not, but oftentimes I find that answers to my prayers come in such quiet, natural ways that at first I am not even aware my prayers are answered until I look back and see how the hand of God has guided and fulfilled, so that quietly it all began to happen.

There is another verse about Jabez in the Scriptures which helps us understand this. It is the only other time he is mentioned in Scripture. It is found just two chapters back, where in, Verse 55, it says:

The families also of the scribes that dwelt at Jabez: {1 Chr 2:55 RSV}

The account then goes on to list who they were. Here Jabez is a place name, indicative of the fact that when this young man won back his property and his inheritance, it became in turn a place where the scribes began to study.

Isn't this highly suggestive of something about Jabez? Not only was he a man of prayer, but it is suggested here that he was also a man of the Word. He understood the Scriptures:

- It was through them he learned to pray;
- It was there he learned about the God of Israel;
- It was there he learned what he might expect from this God, and what promises were given to him.

All this took such importance in his life that in some remarkable way, which we are not told but which is nevertheless reflected in this official account from the temple registry, Jabez established a school of training in the Word of God for young men and women. Here at Jabez was the training school of these scribes who were to be the prophets to go out and teach the Scriptures in the various villages and places of the land of Israel. This is a beautiful picture of how adequately God answered this young man's prayer. How practical, therefore, prayer becomes!

I do not know how many of you feel close to Jabez. I think if we asked you, two-thirds of this congregation would indicate that you feel this is talking about you. What encouragement it gives us that prayer is designed to meet us right where we are! We can bring our requests and make them known unto God, and as we do so, in the realization that he loves us and cares for us and is individually involved with each of us to the fullest degree, he will lead us through all the present difficulties of our life, mixed up as they may be and impossible as they may look, and bring us through to glory.

Earlier this morning we sang,

God leads His dear children along,
Some through the waters,
 some through the flood,
Some through the fire,
 but all through the blood.

God will lead us along too, as he led Jabez along, to a place where, looking back, we suddenly see that all our prayers were answered.

There is a hymn I have always loved that puts this very beautifully. It is that hymn, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go* :

O Love that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

That is what prayer is all about.

It is a way of laying hold of the greatness, the glory, the wisdom and the knowledge of God, not in dramatic interventions, but in quiet daily ways by which God works through the normal circumstances of our lives to lead us to the fulfillment of our deepest desires.

There is a word from the psalmist that says it all: "Thou has led me into a wide place." That is what happened to Jabez. I trust it will happen to you.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for this look at this young man's life. How you answered his prayer, granted what he had asked and brought him along to the fulfillment of it in that gentle, quiet way by which you lead us into green pastures, and make us to lie down beside still waters. Though you sometimes take us through the valley of the shadow of death, yet we fear no evil, for thou art with us, thy rod and thy staff they comfort us, and you prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies; our cup runs over. Lord, we thank you for that. We rejoice now in the promises that surround us, the love that upholds us, and the grace that leads us along. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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