

**PRAYING JABEZ'S PRAYER:
TURNING AN OBSCURE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE
INTO A MIRACLE-WORKING MANTRA
A REVIEW ARTICLE**

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A recent best-selling evangelical book claims that a single biblical sentence can revolutionize the life of every believer who prays it daily. According to Multnomah Press, which published *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* by Bruce Wilkinson in 2000, sales of the book have now topped nine million with more than thirteen million copies in print, making it the fastest selling book of all time. The prayer boasts its own web-page where scores of satisfied “pray-ers” give glowing testimony to their most recent “Jabez blessings” or “Jabez appointments.” In addition, a wide range of accompanying publications and Jabez *kitsch* is available at Christian bookstores to help spread the message (e.g., a Jabez journal, a version for pre-schoolers, and a leather-bound edition, as well as coins, fake rocks, and wooden crosses inscribed with “the Prayer,” and reportedly even Jabez coffee mugs, bath gel, and neckties, though a proposal for Jabez candy bars was rejected).

For many Christians, the amazing success of Wilkinson’s book *is* sufficient evidence that God’s blessing is behind it. And they are understandably thrilled to see a ninety-four-page book concerning an obscure OT text displayed so prominently in local secular bookstores and becoming the subject of talk show interviews. But is such a response warranted when the book’s interpretation, application, and implementation of this passage are deeply flawed? Is successful marketing more important to us than biblical accuracy?

Before setting forth my concerns regarding the Jabez phenomenon, let me briefly summarize the book’s message and claims. According to Wilkinson’s preface, the prayer recorded in I Chr 4:9-10 “contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God” (p. 7). Named Jabez (meaning “Pain,” according to Wilkinson) by his mother, this enterprising individual sought to counter the precarious future that such a name “defined” (p. 21). This led him to pray “the biggest, most improbable request imaginable” (p. 22).

In Wilkinson’s interpretation, the four clauses of Jabez’s prayer form a sequence of four distinct requests: (1) *Oh, that You would bless me indeed. . .*, i.e., God, impart your supernatural favor, your power to accomplish great things, on me this day but do so in whatever way you desire; (2). . . *and enlarge my territory. . .*, i.e., as you continue to bless me daily, grant me more influence, more responsibility, more opportunity to make an impact for you; (3).. . *that Your hand would be with me. . .*, i.e., having thus stepped out of my comfort zone and realm of personal competence, I am utterly dependent on your help if I am to succeed; and (4). . . *and that*

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You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain, i.e., such successes will certainly attract Satan's attack, so protect me from deception, dangerous misjudgments, or misleading feelings that could cause me to sin and thereby threaten my work for you.

The prayer of Jabez, as analyzed by Wilkinson, offers a strikingly comprehensive series of requests, each of which certainly represents a valid topic for prayer. However, his *interpretation* of these individual requests and of the significance of their order is seriously flawed in a number of respects:

(1) There is no biblical basis for concluding that the four requests of Jabez's prayer form the kind of sequence that Wilkinson assumes. In his interpretation, each request in turn must be fulfilled (and an undetermined amount of time must pass) before the next is warranted. For example, Wilkinson claims regarding request number three: "Notice that Jabez did not begin his prayer by asking for God's hand to be with him. At that point, he didn't sense the need. Things were still manageable" (p. 48).

How should this text be interpreted? Probably, all four requests were part of a prayer that was conceived and prayed at one time. Furthermore, the nature of Hebrew elevated style is such that this prayer probably consists of two requests, each of them formulated as a parallel couplet moving from the general to the specific. The prayer begins with a *general* request for God's significant blessing, indicated by the emphatic word "indeed." The *specific* blessing that Jabez requests is more territory for himself, most likely arable land, in keeping with the divine promise in Exod 34:24. In summary, this first request would be similar in structure to the priestly blessing in Num 6:24: "May the LORD bless you [general] and protect you [specific]."

Jabez's second two-part request, "Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain" (NW), follows the same pattern as the first. In general, he wants God to be "with him." More specifically, he wants God to protect him from any harm that could cause him pain. His reference to pain presents a wordplay on his name, "Jabez (Ya'BeTZ)," which sounds like the Hebrew word for "pain," (Hebrew *'eTZeB*, which uses the same three consonants but in a different order). Unlike his mother, who experienced a painful birth according to I Chr 4:9, he wants to avoid pain in life. Jabez's request may allude to Gen 3:16-17, since both verses employ the same Hebrew root as occurs in I Chr 4:9-10, referring respectively to childbirth and manual labor.

(2) Wilkinson's understanding of the prayer's fourth request is dependent on his choice of translations. Out of twenty published translations that I consulted, only *one* supports his view, the New King James Version (for which Wilkinson served on the editorial board). The NKJV rendering, "that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain," sounds strikingly similar to the final request of the Lord's Prayer. However, most translations understand the request much differently. Note, for example, the following variations: "keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain" (NIV); "keep me from all trouble and pain" (NLT); and "keep me from hurt and harm" (NRSV). The four-word Hebrew text here is somewhat difficult, lending itself to a variety of renderings. Therefore, Larry Pechawer, a professor of Hebrew and OT in Missouri, in a privately-published book, *The Lost Prayer of Jabez*, proposes the following new translation which modifies the Hebrew *vowels* while retaining the original *consonants*: "and

provide me with pastureland (*MiR'eH* rather than *MeRa'aH*), so that I will not be in distress.” This suggestion, which is worthy of serious consideration, would negate Wilkinson’s interpretation of the fourth request, making it quite similar to Jabez’s second request.

(3) Also problematic is the way in which Wilkinson speculatively fills out the details, psychologizing the text in questionable ways. Most striking *is* his surmise that Jabez was “weighed down by the sorrow of his past and the dreariness of his present” (p. 22), presumably due to his name (which sounds similar to, but does not mean, “pain”). Furthermore, he claims that the motivation for Jabez’s request for more territory is his desire to “make a greater impact” for God (p. 31). In fact, however, it is more likely that Jabez is simply seeking additional material resources. Jabez’s desire for more land can be compared with an incident recorded later in the same chapter, in which several families from Simeon go in search of more pastureland, destroying the nonIsraelites living there in order to take control of it (cf. I Chr 4:38-43.) To sum up, the prayer that Wilkinson urges believers to pray daily may be quite different from the prayer that Jabez actually prayed.

In addition to the interpretive problems that Wilkinson’s book raises, there also are several problems in his specific *applications*. The first problem is his transformation of the details of a narrative report into universal instruction. To be sure, OT narratives are selective, and the fact that Jabez’s prayer is even recorded is significant. However, a passage like I Chr 4:9-10 must be understood in the light of its immediate literary context. Jabez’s prayer is significant not because he discovered just the right formulation to unlock the divine treasure trove, as Wilkinson claims, but because answered prayer is a major theme in the books of 1-2 Chronicles. This text vividly illustrates “the Chronicler’s belief in the efficacy of prayer, much emphasized later in the narrative” (H. G. M. Williamson, *1 and 2 Chronicles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 59-60). The best known of these prayers is Solomon’s Temple dedication prayer (2 Chr 6:12-42) and God’s familiar response in 2 Chr 7:11-22 (“If my people, who are called by name...). Other answered prayers which, like Jabez’s, address physical circumstances include 1 Chr 5:20-22; 2 Chr 20:6-12; and 2 Chr 32:24. In fact, even the wording of the request “Let your hand be with me” is significant within the context of 1-2 Chronicles, for God’s being “with” individuals constitutes a theological sub-theme throughout (see 1 Chr 9:20; 11:9; 17:2, 8; 22:11, 16, 18; 28:22; 2 Chr 1:1; 13:12; 15:2,9; 17:3; 19:6, 11; 20:17; 25:7; 32:7, 8; 35:21; 36:23).

Jabez’s prayer and God’s response are an *illustration*, not a *model*, of this theological lesson. There is no textual basis for concluding, as Wilkinson does (1) that his prayer was more significant, either in its formulation or in its effect, than any other prayer recorded in the Bible; or (2) that he prayed it more than once or in stages. Fee and Stuart, in *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* ([Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], 84), write, “Narratives record what happened — not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.” What the Bible *describes* is not necessarily what it *prescribes* for us.

A second and related problem is Wilkinson’s two-fold spiritualization of Jabez’s request to “enlarge his territory.” Jabez’s prayer can only be relevant to every Christian if Wilkinson interprets Jabez’s request for more “real estate,” that is, farmland, as representing any change in our circumstances that involves “more influence, more responsibility, and more opportunity” (p.

30). However, contrary to Wilkinson's claim, there is a definite possibility that God's giving him more territory and protecting him from harm actually made his life easier and less challenging! Jabez's desire for "enlarged territory" should be contrasted with the "Lord's Prayer" in which the request for "our daily bread" is usually understood as denoting our regular material needs. It is not a legitimate hermeneutical move to turn every detail in a biblical narrative into a generalized spiritual equivalent. Such details may be essential components of the "story" but not necessarily of the intended message. Furthermore, in Wilkinson's analysis, anything can be an answer to this petition—from giving birth to twins, to having an opportunity to witness to someone on a plane, to being made sales manager over a larger region, to being promoted to CEO. Experiencing such answers, according to Wilkinson, constitutes having "a front row seat in a life of miracles" (p. 44), defining a miracle as "an intervention by God to make something happen that wouldn't normally happen" (p. 43). However, it is certainly not clear that God's response to Jabez's prayer—"And God granted him his request"—was miraculous by any normal definition of the term.

A further spiritualization *is* necessary, for it also must be assumed by Wilkinson that, in praying this prayer, Jabez (and every Christian) is motivated primarily by a desire to make a greater impact for God. Once again, there is no textual basis for assuming that this was, in fact, Jabez's motivation. Perhaps he simply desires a less painful and problematic life. It clearly is not the case that God only answers unselfish requests (see, for example, Ps 106:13-15, referring to Num 11:4-34). And it is not necessary for us to be granted "more territory" in order to "be more and do more for God" (p. 10, cf. p. 30).

Although the interpretive and applicational weaknesses of *The Prayer of Jabez* are quite troubling, it is Wilkinson's suggestions for *implementation* that are the greatest cause for concern. First of all, Wilkinson encourages all readers to pray the prayer of Jabez daily for at least a trial month, and he recommends making this "a lifelong commitment" (p. 29), just as he has done. This brings with it the danger of reducing our regular prayer life to a simple formula, and it inflates the value of one biblical prayer, virtually turning it "into a Christian mantra," in the words of *Newsweek* reporter Kenneth Woodward (August 27, 2001, p. 47). Some Christians also pray the Lord's Prayer daily or weekly (with considerably more warrant, cf. Matt 6:9), so such a practice is not inherently misdirected. However, in Wilkinson's instructions, this daily prayer is linked with unqualified assurances: it is "a daring prayer that God always answers" so that "thousands of believers . . . are seeing miracles happen on a regular basis" (p. 7). "Through a simple, believing prayer, you can change your future. You can change what happens one minute from now" (p. 29).

There is no way of testing this claim, and Wilkinson offers no clear biblical support to substantiate it. Such an extravagant claim leads inevitably to one of two responses. One can either become frustrated or desperate, as did one individual who wrote to the "Prayer of Jabez" website on 1-23-2001:

I wish I had a victorious tale to tell. I am now in my 4th reading of your book since I bought it in November. I have prayed Jabez's prayer diligently, and at least once almost daily. I believe God wants to bless me. I am waiting to receive his bounty. I am still

unemployed. . . . I want for nothing more than for God to show me what, if anything, is obstructing the flow of his blessings toward us. Please pray. . . for God to bless us. . . Indeed!

Or one can interpret every good thing that happens in one's life as a divine (and miraculous) answer to one's prayer. In fact, even bad things have been given the same interpretation: for example, it was mentioned during the memorial service for Veronica Bowers, who died when a missionary plane was shot down by Peruvian drug enforcement officials, that she had been praying "the Prayer," with the implication that her martyrdom was a possible answer to that prayer. And what should one conclude if one's "territory" is drastically enlarged without even praying the prayer? Hence, as a result of one's interpretive labeling of events, the prayer is deemed to be always effective.

The greatest problem with the current "prayer of Jabez" fad is its one-sided focus on personal, and especially material, blessing. Although this may not be Wilkinson's intent, all of the examples cited in his book and reported on the book's website involve either concrete benefits such as healing, new property, career advancement, investment gains, or quantifiable "Jabez appointments." No suggestion is made that praying the prayer of Jabez could also result in the type of spiritual growth that Paul prays for repeatedly in his Epistles (e.g., Eph 3:16-19; Cal 1:9-14; Phil 1:9-11; 2 Thess 1:11-12), even though these traits are foundational for effective Christian service. Also absent from Wilkinson's discussion is anything resembling Paul's exhortation in Phil 2:4 to look out for the interests of others rather than looking out for our own interests. Furthermore, Wilkinson's recommendation can too easily degenerate into a selfish dissatisfaction with the situation into which God, in his sovereign wisdom, has placed us. God's desire is for us to learn to trust, obey, develop perseverance, and serve him where we are, especially if our circumstances involve suffering and pain, rather than requesting an enlarged (i.e., different) territory. Like Paul, we can learn to be content (Phil 4:12) and be faithful in small matters, leaving it up to God to give us greater responsibilities if he so chooses (Luke 16:10).

Would *The Prayer of Jabez* have become a bestseller if the author had been a "health and wealth" televangelist rather than the founder of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries? Will his message receive the same reception in the poverty-stricken areas of the Two-Thirds World as it has in affluent North American and Western European circles? Regardless of how one might answer these questions, Bruce Wilkinson's territory continues to expand. According to the Feb. 26, 2002 "Religion BookLine from Publishers Weekly," he resigned his position as president of the ministry that he founded twenty-five years ago to move to Los Angeles, where his plans included a full-length film based on the prayer of Jabez featuring major Hollywood talent. In addition to authoring two more bestsellers, Wilkinson has established Global Vision Resources to take these teachings to every nation across the globe through the mediums of video, television, and film. However, as a result of a three-week ministry trip to Southern Africa, he and his wife Darlene recently have moved instead to Johannesburg, South Africa, where they are helping to fight HIV/ AIDS and widespread famine — a vast territory indeed!

I doubt that the "big screen" version would have shed any further light on the question of

whether praying “the Prayer” will cause God “for all eternity” to “lavish on you His honor and delight” (p. 92) or would illustrate rather what Jas 4:3 describes: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend ‘what you get on your pleasures.’” Kenneth Woodward, religion reporter for *Newsweek*, concludes his discussion of the *The Prayer of Jabez* (“Platitudes or Prophecy?” August 27, 2001, p. 47) by opining that a better choice for a widespread readership would be “any verse from the Book of Psalms, [or] the prayers Jesus himself recited, which ask only for forgiveness and the grace to do God’s will.” The sales of Wilkinson’s little book *The Prayer of Jabez* is certainly a remarkable success story, but it may tell us more about contemporary American evangelicalism than about the accuracy of his interpretation of Jabez’s original prayer. As my hermeneutics professor would say, rather ironically, “Wonderful things in the Bible I see, most of them put there by you or by me!”