

Marion weekly update AUGUST 21, 2022
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON Aug 14, 'Prayer: Jabez' 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

This week we return to looking at prayers prayed in scripture.

Specifically today we consider a prayer made quite famous about 20 or so years ago, the prayer of Jabez. This was actually specifically requested to be in the series. Though if you're a fan of the book that came out, I hope this doesn't step too hard on any toes.

That said, and I can't push this strong enough as I woke up middle of the night with this sentiment. Pray this prayer. We'll come back to it later because even without all the hocus pocus there are some slivers of truth. Not guarantees. Just realities to remind us to look around us for the very answers to our prayers that may be existing in the exact moment we're seeking.

As part of our series on prayers in the Bible, it makes sense that this follows last week's message. Last week we looked at how scripture is used in prayer. We recognized that scripture is not intended to be promises and answers to someone other than ourselves that we get to claim because we like them. We also recognized that scripture is not some code to crack the riddle of how to force God to give us what we want. The trendy notion of the prayer of Jabez does both.

We can't claim this prayer because it's not ours and the answer was for Jabez and Jabez alone. The prayer was offered in the spirit that suggests if we pray this prayer over and over, God will give us the same answer as Jabez. Not only that, but we can substitute what we please for "territory". Certainly there are some good and correct sentiments attached to it such as wanting what we ask for the right reasons and in some way using what we ask for in service to God. But the bottom line is we'll get what we ask for.

We also need to unpack that there are assumptions about Jabez that aren't Biblical. They are convenient but not scriptural. We'll get to that in a moment.

But the fad idea of this prayer can't be addressed without what happened soon after the success of the book and all the attached merchandise.

The idea certainly hit a chord with society at the time. But we need to remember that just become something sounds good and runs away with itself in popularity doesn't mean it's correct.

About two years after the success of the Prayer of Jabez, the author announced he had a vision and call to go to Africa and save it from the AIDS epidemic. So he went and began something called Dream for Africa. This project had as its main goal the desire to save 10,000 orphans of parents who died from AIDS. Their first goal became to help with hunger. The country where they began was South Africa. Enlisting international help, they planted sustainable gardens in tons of South African yards. From what I've read it was arguably the most successful of their programs.

The second was to slow the spread of AIDS. They did this by organizing a campaign to go around South Africa with abstinence programs and education. I couldn't find any research on numbers, however it is widely understood that abstinence training alone does not significantly slow the spread of HIV.

The final, and biggest push was for the orphans. For this he went to neighboring Swaziland, which had one of, if not, the highest percentages of those carrying HIV in Africa. The plan was to lease a large piece of land for 99 years and construct a facility that was part orphanage part tourist attraction. There would be homes to house and care for thousands of orphans who would be educated and trained likely to help with some of the attractions for the tourists. Two of the attractions mentioned were a Wild West experience and a wildlife safari experience.

There would be a nice bed and breakfast and luxury hotel for tourists to stay in, and all the amenities with an 18 hole golf course. The idea was for the wealthy tourists to feel good about their vacation as it would be used to help fund this charitable work.

After months of negotiations with the king of Swaziland and the government they came up with a plan. The plan was presented and the king and government given five days to accept it or they would take it elsewhere. Several months more went by and ultimately the plan was rejected. It was rejected for three primary reasons.

The king didn't care for it.

The press mocked it.

The last I believe is the most significant. Wilkinson and his team didn't take into consideration the culture. The people didn't like the idea of removing these orphans from their villages, clans, and tribes. It was their job to look after these children. Also, if the children left for this facility they might give up property their parents had left them. There were other details but from what I've read, these are the main ones.

The thing is that the prayer of Jabez had been prayed over this endeavor constantly. Despite the repetition of this supposed guarantee of God granting the request, their mission failed. Wilkinson conveniently felt called back to America. Pastors trained by him in Swaziland communicated they felt abandoned. They didn't know how to finish the work without the personality that was at the center of it all gone. Ultimately the Dream for Africa initiative fizzled out.

It's noted that Wilkinson for at least a time would be baffled at why it didn't work even though it was bathed in the prayer of Jabez. The hocus pocus of how this prayer had been presented was exposed by the author himself.

So what can we glean from it with Biblical integrity?

First let's look at Jabez. The book makes a lot of assumptions about Jabez. Sticking to scripture and one or two other reliable references, we see him more honestly even if less clearly. Jabez hasn't much press in the Bible. The man is only mentioned here. Jabez elsewhere is a town. That's it. A few verses plus a little Jewish literature of the time aside from the Old Testament tells us a few things.

We know that his birth was painful to his mother, and as a gift she gave him a name that means "pain or sorrow."

We know that he was an honorable man. We don't know the fullness of what this constitutes other than it set him apart from his brothers. Part of what lets us know that there is something unusual and positive about Jabez is that in a list of names through the surrounding verses, he is the one that gets a special note of mention. And it's a good note. Beyond this, however, we know little else from scripture.

Outside scripture there is a note in some Jewish writing that Jabez established an institution for educating some Levite children. What, how, when, and such we don't know. We simply know he established this institution which perhaps implies he has an interest in training future priests and scribes properly for their spiritual work. We know he prayed to have his land expanded and to be kept from sorrow and pain himself.

The prayer itself is also specific yet vague. He asked for more land. To say he was asking for more ministry opportunities, or other ventures is disingenuous. He asked for land and a very normal request to be kept from pain and harm. We don't know why he wanted the land. We don't know what he did with it when he got it. We just know what he asked, and that God answered with a "yes".

If we are being Biblically honest, the idea that this is a powerful prayer that will get God to grant us what we ask and apply it across the board of our lives is a nothing burger. But that doesn't mean there is nothing we can take from it that is hopeful, encouraging, and deepening for our faith.

The most obvious hope that we see here is that yes, God does answer prayers with a "yes". We can't plan it, we can't demand it, but we can hope for it. Jabez asked, God granted. If we wonder whether or not we should ask God, look at Jabez. As I've often been told "you don't know if you don't ask". And "if you never ask, the answer is always 'no'".

We also see it reinforced the idea of blessing we'd considered a while ago in a different message. Blessings is simply the favor of God resting on us. We don't know how God will do it, but we know it happens. We don't know when, but we know it will. Which means we need to be attentive to looking for it. With Jabez it is reinforced for us part of what cultivates God's favor. Walking honorably before God cultivates God's favor. And sometimes that favor may look like a granted request.

I can't claim this one, but I agree with it. I read it from a review of the Jabez book: A legitimate takeaway for us is that whatever we may be at one stage of life we don't have to be that forever. Jabez called his mother pain. She gave him a name to remind him of that. Perhaps that followed him. Maybe he grasped the nature of causing and experiencing pain. So he asked for himself to be spared. He became an honorable man, presumably causing as little pain as possible. He established that institution for the Levite children.

Like Jabez, none of us are defined by a single moment or opinion of us. Most if not all of us have been thought poorly and likely spoken poorly of by someone else. Sometimes it may even be merited. But we don't have to be that person forever. With God's help we move forward and beyond it. We become more and better so that who we were no longer represents who we are.

The most significant hope is oddly in a sort of keeping with some of the hocus pocus of the fad 20 years ago, though it's more practical. It doesn't deal in commanding God or false encounters. But I think there IS something to the idea of being inspired by this prayer to pray for God's "expansion" in other areas as well.

Let's take the matter of personal or corporate ministry. We ask God to expand the borders of our ministry to include people and opportunities we've never embraced before. What may be seen as God dropping people and opportunities into our path may be something entirely different and lead us to a different but perhaps mutually correct and beneficial prayer

as well.

Opportunities and people cross our paths every day. We simply may not notice them. It's not their absence keeping our borders smaller, it's our lack of awareness of their presence. Or sometimes maybe we see them, but don't acknowledge them. Or acknowledge them but don't engage them.

In other words the prayer of "expand my territory" may be just as honestly prayed "help me see the opportunities you've already placed before me."

God has an amazing mission field already waiting. Even Jesus said "the harvest is ready but the laborers are few". Our job is to be those attentive, ready, willing laborers who will embrace the call God has put on every one of us to notice those who no one else does and engage the opportunities others are afraid to. God has all kinds of opportunities for every aspect of our lives. The question isn't God's provision. It's our ability to notice what God is already doing and offering. Right alongside the honest and real prayer for God to bless us has to be the fervent prayer for us to notice where God is already blessing us and the courage to seize on it.

The prayer of Jabez may not be some instantly gratifying self-help means of getting what we want. But it is in truth something so much more and so much more real. It is a reminder that God does answer prayer with a "yes". It is a reminder that honoring God does bring about God's favor. It is a reminder that no matter what we may be labelled in our lives we are not held prisoner to that.

With God's help we can grow beyond it. And while it may not be a guarantee to get what we want, it inspires us to ask and then look to see where God is already at work and has been at work with the already present content of our lives to offer us the opportunity to serve God and get the version of what we want in keeping with God's plan and desire.

Calendar

Aug 21 - Marion Days community worship

followed by community wide potluck.

Chicken provided -office needs a

head count for fried chicken, please

Aug 22 - Event Planning Meeting 7pm

Aug 28 - Personal Mission vision meeting

after worship

Aug 31 -30 West Breakfast 8:00

CONFIRMATION CLASS BEGINS!

See Brent. Meeting for parents and students will be scheduled asap.

"MEMBERSHIP CLASS" BEGINS!

For anyone interested in Methodist distinctives

Sept 1 - Mission Central volunteers meet at 8am

Sept 5 - Council Meeting 7pm

Sept 7 - Lunch (Maybe Stoners??) 11:30

Sept 8 - Volleyball resumes

Sept 10 - Stitch 1 Pray 2, 8:30am

Sept 13-Bible Study resumes

Sept 13 - Community Meal -Taco Tuesday, 5:30

Sept 17 - Game Night !

Sept 28 -30 West Breakfast 8am

Your Giving

Offering	\$4,594
Missions	\$150
Shoe Box donation	\$100
Backpack donation	\$20
Building Fund	\$337
Improvement	\$95
Love Offering	\$40
Received to Date	\$134,310
Needed to Date	\$137,709

