

**Course on Prayer - AVBC, 2005**  
by Ron Habinski

***Unit #9 Avoiding Nonsensical Prayer Ideas and Practices***

**INTRODUCTION**

- There are circulating in our world some very strange and misguided notions about prayer.  
- At the end of our last unit I asked you to try to think of some ideas about prayer, or approaches to prayer, that you think are incorrect, and possibly very foolish as well.

**Q: Can you think of an incorrect idea about prayer or a misguided prayer practice?**

**A: [DISCUSS AT LENGTH]**

**Ideas to include:**

- Formula theories of prayer – if you pray correctly God will do as you ask.
- Prayer is primarily about getting what you want from God.
- Done properly, prayer is a two-way conversation.
- King James English is more honouring to God.
- An excuse for inaction and sloth; an alternative to constructive action – let God look after it.
- It is proper to pray to the Holy Spirit
- It is good to pray to angels or dead saints.
- Frequent repetition of God's name in prayer honours Him.
- Repeating a prayer many times and word-for-word is effective.
- Long prayers are naturally better.
- Fulfilling one of God's condition for prayer binds Him to act (e.g. faith or praying in Jesus' name).

**THE OTHER PRAYER OF JABEZ**

- Wrongheaded or misguided ideas about prayer are not all found outside the Christian Church.  
- I would like to examine with you a prime example of misguided Christian teaching about prayer.

- I hope you will find this study informative when we explore what the Bible actually says about Jabez and his prayer; and that it will also help to put you on guard against other examples of the sloppy handling of the Scriptures.

- The prayer of Jabez was a fairly short one, and the record of his prayer is tucked away in a seldom-studied passage of Scripture, in the middle of a very long genealogical list that occupies the first 9 chapters of first Chronicles.

- In spite of its inconspicuous location, I suspect that most of you have heard of this prayer, because of a much-advertised book that attempts to explain and apply it.

- Some of you may even have read the much promoted and widely-distributed little book, entitled, "*The Prayer of Jabez.*"

- In the preface to his book, the author, Bruce Wilkinson, says, "*I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. ---it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God.*" [italics mine]

**[READ TWICE]**

- I read this to let you know the author's general approach to the prayer, and not because I agree with his explanation of it.

- In this unit I would like to explore with you, "*The other prayer of Jabez.*"

***Q: What do I mean by: “The other prayer of Jabez”?***

**A:** I chose this title to make an important distinction between the prayer of Jabez described in Bruce Wilkinson's book, and the prayer of Jabez that is recorded for us in the Bible.

- I believe that the prayer expounded in the book and the one recorded in the Scriptures are quite different from one another.

- Consequently, my purpose is to:

1. show you that the book does not faithfully explain and apply the Biblical prayer of Jabez; and then

2. explain the prayer that Jabez actually prayed and share some of its meaning for us.

- Everything that we know about the life and prayer life of Jabez is contained in two short verses in 1 Chronicles.

- The first 9 chapters of 1 Chronicles are devoted to listing the genealogy of the tribes of Israel from Adam all the way down to the family of Saul, Israel's first king.

- This list of begets contains over 500 difficult-to-pronounce Hebrew names, and is not what most people would consider captivating reading.

- In fact it is really quite puzzling that Jabez' mini-biography and prayer are included in this section of scripture at all.

- **Now let's read the Biblical account of Jabez in 1 Chron 4:8-11**

- If you think about it, it is really very puzzling that Jabez' story is included in this passage at all, because his name is not mentioned in the genealogical list or connected to it in any way.

- So it is impossible to know where he fits into the history of his nation.

- The preceding verse lists the sons of Helah and the sons of Koz, but Jabez is not mentioned in either of these lists.

- Some scholars have guessed that the name of Jabez was once included along with the two sons of Koz named in verse 8, and his name was lost due to careless scribal copying of this passage.

- Unfortunately, there is absolutely no evidence to support this guess.

- It is also unfortunate that this chapter of Chronicles is not included among the Biblical scrolls found at Qumran, so we have no way of checking on the possibility of an error in the transmission of the Biblical text of verse 8.

- In addition, the story of Jabez in verses 9 and 10 also seems to have no connection of any sort with the verses that follow it, so the context fails to tell us anything at all about the life or times of Jabez, beyond what is mentioned in the two verses that speak about him.

- What this means is that we have no real idea where Jabez fits into the family of Israel.

- This is especially perplexing, because the first of the two verses that speak about him says that ***“Jabez was more honorable than his brothers.”***

- Unfortunately, we know nothing about his brothers.

- We have no idea how many brothers he had or what their names were.

- In fact, and this, I think, is rather humorous, their only claim to fame is the fact that they were the brothers of Jabez, and they were overshadowed by him, as far as honour was concerned.

- As for why Jabez was considered an honourable man, and a more honourable man than his brothers, our only clue is what is preserved in these two verses about his birth, his naming, and his prayer and how God answered it.

- Apparently, something in these few facts should suggest to us why he was regarded as particularly honourable.

- By the way, the Hebrew verb, ***to be honourable*** comes from a root that means, ***to be heavy***.

- In a sense, this word has a lot in common with the slang expression, ***heavy!***, which had its time

of popularity among adolescents as a favourite adjective to describe anything that was seen as good or important.

- In comparison to his brothers, Jabez was *“heavy!”*

- Later on, we will consider why the Holy Spirit saw fit to have Jabez included in the Biblical account at all.

- **Let's re-read the two verses that speak about Jabez in 1 Chron 4:9f.**

- Now that we have read the words of Jabez' prayer, I would like to direct your attention to what Bruce Wilkinson says is the meaning of that prayer.

## **1. WHAT DOES HIS BOOK TELL US IS THE MEANING OF THE PRAYER OF JABEZ?**

- The book tells us that things started badly for Jabez, with his mother in effect placing a curse upon him when she named him.

- Then he prayed an unusual one-sentence prayer, and things ended extraordinarily well for him.

- I agree with each of these main points.

- The author also makes the reasonable point that Jabez' request to be blessed by God seems somewhat selfish (p18).

- But then he goes on to portray Jabez as some sort of spiritual champion or giant.

- Many of the points he makes in his book may be perfectly sound New Testament teaching, but it is very hard to believe that they were what Jabez had in mind when he prayed his prayer.

- Here are some quotes and paraphrases, that I think show that the book consistently ignores the simple facts of what little we are told about Jabez in these two Bible verses, and goes far beyond their simple, obvious meaning.

- As I read this summary, I want you to bear in mind that I think that most of it is completely foreign to the true, original meaning of the prayer of Jabez.

- Ask yourself if you agree with me or with the book.

- **Here is what the book says about the prayer of Jabez:**

*“Jabez wanted to be more and do more for God, - -”* (p10)

- *He left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessings would be and where and when and how Jabez would receive them.”* (p24)

- In other words, he surrendered his life to God's will (p24).

- People who do not pray for God's blessing on their lives miss blessings, blessings that He has scheduled for them to receive *if and only if* they ask to be blessed (p25f)

- When Jabez asked God to expand his boundaries he was actually asking Him (p30ff) to enlarge his life, to enable him to do more for God (p32), to give him increased opportunities to influence others (p82, 89).

- Jabez was asking for increased responsibilities and greater opportunities to make his mark for God.

- The boundaries that Jabez wanted God to expand for him were his personal frontiers.

[I must interject that the words, *personal frontiers*, may resonate with American readers, because of their national mythology about how the West was won, but do you really think it is relevant in the context of Old Testament times?]

- Jabez was asking to be used and given a greater ministry for God (p36) and a larger life in His service (p39).

- When Jabez asked God to *enlarge his territory* he was actually asking to be blessed with an expanded personal ministry for God (p40f).

- When he asked for God's hand to be with him he was expressing his dependence and asking for

God's power to work through him (p48f 52f), and asking for Spirit filling (p54f)

- The author also makes much of how Jabez asked to be kept from sin and temptation. (p62ff)

- He bases this theme on the King James version which says, "*Oh, that you would keep me from evil.*"

[- This is how this phrase is translated in the King James, but modern translations more accurately indicate that what Jabez was actually asking for was to be kept from harm, rather than from doing what is wrong.]

- Finally, the author says that God gave Jabez all these things because he was praying courageously and in the will of God. (p90ff).

[- I guess one must agree that Jabez' prayer was within the will of God, or God would not have granted his request. But it seems to me that Jabez was just asking for what he wanted, and there is no particular indication in the text that he was concerned with whether what he was asking for was within the will of God.]

- As I understand it, what Mr. Wilkinson sets out in his book is a formula theory of prayer.

- Jabez prayed properly. His prayer was a model prayer, so if we pray exactly the way he did, and praying his prayer regularly and often is recommended too, then we will receive the same answer that Jabez received.

- Of course, the Bible does not suggest that this was a model prayer, and it is conspicuously silent about how often Jabez prayed it or whether he had a spirit of submission to God's will.

- And the Bible says nothing about our praying the same prayer, and makes no promises about what will happen if we do.

- The author has to reach down into his imagination or forward into the New Testament to get such ideas, but he seems to believe they are to be found in the words of these two verses.

- How does the author defend his understanding of the life and prayer of Jabez?

- He shamelessly spiritualizes the words used in the prayer, ignoring their normal meaning in their historical and cultural context.

- He quotes many New Testament passages, which make some of the points he is trying to draw out of the prayer of Jabez, but that does not in any way demonstrate that the prayer of Jabez contains those ideas.

- This book contains some of the most stunning examples of *eisegesis* that I have ever seen in my study of Biblical interpretation.

- Before we continue, I need to explain two technical terms that are often used in Biblical studies.

- Those terms are *exegesis* and *eisegesis* [WRITE WORDS ON FLIPCHART].

- I should point out that neither of these words has anything to do with the name, *Jesus*.

- The similarity between the sound of these two words and the sound of His name is purely a coincidence.

- The technical term for the proper exposition or explanation of the meaning of scripture is *exegesis*.

- The term, *exegesis*, means *bringing out* the meaning of the words of Scripture.

- Naturally, what we want is to bring out the meaning contained in the words of scripture.

- For this reason, *exegesis* is a good thing.

- The term *eisegesis* is the exact opposite of the word *exegesis* in its meaning.

- *Eisegesis* means *bringing in*, importing meaning into the words of Scripture that is foreign to those words, and claiming to have found that meaning in those words.

- There seems to be a lot of *eisegesis* or *bringing in [of foreign ideas]* in this book.

- The author also uses many personal examples and stories about God's blessing of people who have asked to be used by Him and profitable to Him.
- These stories are all very well and good, but they have absolutely nothing to do with the prayer of Jabez, which the author thinks he is explaining.
- I question that anyone living in the days of Jabez thought in terms of serving God, being used by Him to reach out to others, and having expanded opportunities for ministering to others people, people who needed a closer relationship with God.
- The great popularity of this book should serve as a constant reminder to us of the credulity of Christian readers.
- Often Christians are all too ready to uncritically accept what Christian authority figures write or say.
- It is hard to see how clear-thinking people could take seriously the suggestion that all the things mentioned by Mr. Wilkinson were in the mind of Jabez when he prayed his prayer.
- If Jabez had lived in the time of the early Christian Church, and been exposed to the teaching of the apostles, he might have found in his heart the sort of prayer that we are told he actually prayed, but he didn't live in early Christian times.
- Another major flaw of the book is its suggestion that if we pray the prayer of Jabez daily, and frequently, ***God will answer it for us just as He did for Jabez.***
- The expository error made here is known as ***the confusion of the is and the ought.***
- Because this passage ***is*** an accurate account of what God did for Jabez He ***ought*** to do the same for you and me, and He will.
- The fact that God answered the prayer of Jabez is wonderful.
- But God did not have to do so.
- He acted freely and out of His grace, not out of obligation or compulsion.
- And there is no promise stated or implied in this passage that God will answer the same prayer for us in exactly the way He answered it for Jabez if we pray this prayer daily or frequently.
- The portion tells us how God answered one man's prayer.
- Many other devout believers may have prayed for personal blessings without receiving the sort of clear or dramatic response that Jabez received.
- In fact, if we pray this prayer, having in our hearts the meaning that the author of this book reads into it, we will certainly not be praying the prayer that Jabez prayed in any true sense.
- **So all bets as to the outcome of such a prayer are off, if we are basing our expectation and confidence on the teaching of this Biblical passage.**

### **Q: So WHAT DID JABEZ MEAN BY HIS PRAYER?**

**A:** Let's place his prayer in its context.

- His mother had a painful birth when she delivered Jabez.
- It may not have been more painful than most births are without the benefits of an anesthetic, but it hurt her and that fact distressed her, a lot.
- It seems quite clear that she felt rather bitter and resentful about the pain she had endured, and decided to let her newborn son share her pain.
- The name she gave him to carry for the rest of his life was a curse.
- It hurt her to bear him, so when she named him she made up an artificial name by rearranging the letters of the Hebrew word for hurt or pain ('tsb (spelled 'ain, tsade, beth))
- She changed the order of the letters of the Hebrew word ('ain, beth tsade), and added an initial consonant (yodh) which turned the name into a verb expressing a command or wish (hiphil active 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular masculine jussive).

The name she gave her son means, *hurt!*

- Moffat's translation explains the name Jabez as meaning, *hurt!*
- All through his life, whenever she mentioned his name or called him for dinner what she said to him was *hurt!*
- The interesting thing about this strange name is that in both English and Hebrew it can be transitive or intransitive.
- What that means is that the word, *hurt!* can mean *cause hurt to others*, or *experience hurt*.
- You could say that Jabez' unnamed mother wished that her son would either *cause hurt to others* or *experience hurt in his own life* because of the pain he had cause her.
- There is little doubt that she meant the latter, wanting her son to experience pain in his life because of the pain he brought her.
- **But technically, and this is very important for understanding the story of Jabez, the name she gave her son could bear either meaning: cause pain to others, or experience pain.**
- She may have regretted her hasty words after the fact, but a spoken curse, like a spoken blessing, could not be taken back.
- Do you remember how Isaac mistakenly gave Esau's blessing to Jacob when he pretended to be Esau, and then could not change what he had said even though he wanted to?
- For two good reasons, the name of Jabez could not be changed.
- First, because formal naming was a for-life thing, and second, because a spoken curse or blessing could not be retracted or changed after being spoken.
- It is important to bear in mind that *Jabez* was an artificial made up name, and that everyone knew what it meant.
- They also knew why it had been given to the boy child who carried it.
- Every day of his life, his name was a reminder to him and to everyone who knew him that his mother had wished there to be hurt in his life.
- In those days blessings and curses imposed by a parent were taken very seriously.
- We might consider this somewhat superstitious, but the boy probably got used to the idea that life would contain a lot of hurt for him, and there was nothing he could do to change that, or was there?
- He knew his mother meant for him to suffer, whether physical pain, emotional hurt or difficult life circumstances and trials.
- Probably he thought long and hard about that through his childhood and youth.
- How could he escape the effect of her curse?
- As a child of his people and his age, Jabez no doubt expected his mother's curse to do its intended work, by bringing disaster on him in his lifetime.
- Dishonouring, rejecting or hurting his mother in some way would not help.
- It would just make him more deserving of her curse.
- **One day Jabez had a brain wave; a light went on and he saw some other possibilities.**
- Jabez spoke Hebrew, and as a speaker of the Hebrew language, he no doubt realized that the name his mother had given him had two possible meanings, the one his mother no doubt intended: **experience hurt in your life**, and the one she had not intended: **cause pain to others**.
- It also occurred to Jabez that the effect of his mother's curse could be deflected away from him, by One possessing greater power over him and his future than his mother.
- That could only be the God of Israel.
- **God could countermand or redirect the effect of his mother's curse.**
- The Hebrew expression for naming someone is **to call to the person a name**.
- His mother had **called to him** Jabez or Hurt! That is, she had named him Jabez.

- So Jabez called to the God of Israel using the same Hebrew word that was used to describe his cursing by his mother.
- The same Hebrew word (*qr'*), *to call, meaning to name someone or to call out to someone*, is used in this passage both for his naming by his mother and for his appeal to God.
- This is an obvious play on words or pun in the Hebrew original of this passage.
- It is really a shame that this play on words does not come across in English translations.
- His mother had done her calling to curse her boy child, and Jabez would now do His calling, to someone whose word was more powerful than his mothers words could ever be.
- His mother had cursed Jabez, giving expression to a very cruel impulse, so Jabez would appeal to God to undo her curse.
- He began his prayer in a general way, asking for God to *really bless him*.

**Q: What good would that do, we might ask?**

**A: Well, if God were to bless Jabez, what would become of his mother's curse?**

- Surely God's blessing would countermand or overrule any sort of hurt that his given name could bring upon him.
- His prayer for a strong blessing was an appeal to escape his mother's curse, an appeal for general prosperity and success in life instead of hurt.
- His prayer request was based on an important principle.
- The principle was that those whom God blesses, others may not effectively curse.
- Then, after requesting God's general, all-purpose blessing, Jabez got a bit more specific in his praying.
- He prayed, *"Increase my territory."*
- Jabez lived in a pastoral society, where land and crops and flocks and herds represented enduring prosperity and wealth, **so he asked for more land**.
- What could be more natural for someone living where and when he did.
- To put his request in modern terms, Jabez was asking for a good job or a successful career.
- This may not sound like a very spiritual prayer, but it was what he asked God for, and it was within God's power to grant if He would.
- Jabez was not asking for God to use him or give him greater opportunities for service or spiritual outreach to others.
- If someone had suggested praying for such things, he would probably have responded: *"Huh!?, What are you talking about? I don't understand what you mean."*
- He would have responded this way, not because he was slow witted, but because such ideas were completely foreign to his cultural heritage and upbringing.
- Jabez was asking for something that he understood, something that made sense to him, living where and when he did.
- He asked for more land.
- Then Jabez asked for God's hand to be with him.
- Of course, God's hand represents God's support and protection, so this request was another general request for God's protection and blessing.
- Finally, he asked, *"Keep harm away, lest it hurt me."*
- Grammatically, the Hebrew words of this request are unusual, but it is clear that he is asking not to be touched by the hurt his mother has wished would fall on him.
- He may have believed that the his mother's curse must inevitably be fulfilled in some way.
- But in that case, he requested that the other interpretation of his mother's curse be the one to be fulfilled.
- He requested that he in his lifetime might cause or bring pain to someone else rather than

personally experiencing it.

- The words Jabez used in his final request leave that possibility open.
- In other words, he was saying to God, ***“If you permit my mother's curse to fall on someone, let it fall on someone other than me.”***
- That may not sound like a very spiritual request, but it is understandable for a man who believed that his mother's prayer would inevitably be fulfilled one way or another.
- Because of the fear, desperation and faith that prompted this prayer, God was sympathetic to it.
- God in His mercy granted what Jabez called out or asked for.
- Jabez appealed to the God of Israel against his mother's curse, and his appeal to the God of mercy was rewarded.
- God protected Jabez from his mother's curse, and as far as we know, also kept anyone else from being hurt by that curse.

**Q: WHY WAS THIS PRAYER AND ITS ANSWER INCLUDED IN SCRIPTURE?**

**A:** Whatever else you may think about the story of Jabez, you have to appreciate that it is a wonderful human-interest story.

- It is a story about hurt and how two different individuals handled it.
- Jabez' mother handled it, by cursing her newborn baby boy.
- What she did was certainly memorable, and shameful.
- But what Jabez did was even more memorable.
- Jabez found a constructive approach to the hurt that he, no doubt, fully expected to experience.
- He cried out to the God of Israel who is able to bless, and asked Him, in effect, to overrule his mother's curse, or redirect it so it wouldn't harm him personally.
- **His prayer may not seem as spiritual as the one that Mr. Wilkinson tells us he prayed, but it is both permissible and good to appeal to God for protection and blessing.**
- **Such an appeal honours God, and He may answer such a prayer for help.**
- **The Psalmist says, “God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.” (Ps 46:1)**
- **That is the living lesson of Jabez and his prayer.**
- **Whatever our peril, God can help.**
- **When the situation seems hopeless, it is worth asking for His help.**
- **Jabez was more honourable than his brothers, because he grasped this principle and acted on it.**
- **In their written records, the people of Jabez demonstrated that they judged him honourable for praying as he did.**
- **God also appreciated Jabez' appeal to Himself and approved of his prayer.**
- **So He granted His requests.**
- **God blessed Jabez, He gave him land and what normally went along with owning land.**
- **Jabez enjoyed God's general blessings in his lifetime, including material wealth and prosperity.**
- **Jabez was judged honourable, because his prayer honoured God, the God who is merciful to the weak and rewards those who appeal to Him for help.**
- **I think that this simple but important lesson explains why the story of Jabez was preserved for our instruction.**
- **You can probably see now that the prayer of Jabez was really a very personal prayer, one that grew out of the personal and rather sad circumstances surrounding his birth.**
- **It really is a great human interest story!**
- **It really is too bad that it is not better known, and that the book written about Jabez**

misses the point.

- I have a final suggestion as to why Jabez is not mentioned in the genealogy in which his story is recorded.

- It just *could be* that his name was changed, by common agreement.

- He may have been one of the two sons of Koz who are named in verse 8.

- A new name may have been claimed by Jabez or given to him by his mother or some authority figure in his community *because his life did not match his given name*.

- Could his name have become either *Anub* or *Zobebah* the two names mentioned in verse 8?

- It is unlikely that his name was changed to *Zobebah*, because that name seems to come from a Hebrew root meaning *stick to the ground*, a root from which the Hebrew word meaning *lizard* was derived (E.g. Lv 11:29).

- His name just might have been changed to *Anub*, a name that apparently comes from a Hebrew root that means *vineyard*.

The name *Anub* would suggest fruitfulness or bounty, a bounty associated with vineyards.

- A new name might have been fastened to him by someone as a humorous nickname, and then stuck because it seemed to be so appropriate.

- Whether or not his name was changed, we know that God chose to bless him, so his mother's curse did not harm him, even though she, and her son Jabez, and others who knew his story no doubt expected it to.

- A new name would represent a new nature and a new future.

- But with or without a name change, God gave him a new future, a future very different from the one everyone expected him to have.

- Most people have times when they wish they could start over again with a fresh slate and a new identity.

- A new name could help to make a fresh start possible.

- It is interesting to remember that our Lord has promised to give to each of His own who is victorious in this life, *"a white stone with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.* (Rev 2:17)

- He promises to each of them a glorious fresh start, a fresh start symbolized by a new name, a private pet name or love name that is so special that it will be kept secret from everyone but its recipient and God who gives it.

**Q: Have you any questions or comments about the prayer of Jabez?**

- In our next unit we will be examining the subject of: *Prayer and Fasting*.

- Your assignment for next week is to read chapter 13 of our textbook which explores this interesting topic.