

The Prayer of Jabez

by J.C. Philpot

Jabez's prayer is a model for spiritual growth, seeking God's sovereignty, trust in God, and protection from evil.

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 4:10, Job 42:5, Psalm 119:32, Psalm 135:4, Proverbs 15:23, Isaiah 19:25, Isaiah 54:1, Malachi 1:2, John 17:3

Topics: "Effective Prayer", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Joseph Philpot preaches on the prayer of Jabez, highlighting the desires and breathings of a soul seeking God's blessings, spiritual enlargement, divine guidance, and deliverance from evil. Jabez's prayer reflects the experiences of all God's children, showing the need for a personal, spiritual knowledge of God, a longing for genuine blessings, an earnest desire for spiritual growth, a dependence on God's leading, and a plea to be kept from sin. Philpot emphasizes the importance of heartfelt prayers, the seeking of God's hand in all things, and the deep desire to be kept from evil to avoid grief and trouble.

Transcript

by Joseph Philpot, 1841

"And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that you would bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested." 1 Chron. 4:10

Here, in the prayer of Jabez, should the Lord the Spirit lead us into the sweet and rich experience of the passage, we may find in it some green pastures to feed in, and some still waters to lay down by. All the family of God may, more or less distinctly, read their experience in the prayer of Jabez, and see clearly portrayed in it the desires and breathings of their own souls.

But who was Jabez? We read nothing of him beyond these two features, which the Holy Spirit has stamped his name with: first, that he was "more honorable than his brethren;" secondly, that "his mother called his name Jabez which means "sorrowful", because "she bore him with sorrow." As names were generally prophetic in those times, it would seem to imply that he was the sorrowful child of a sorrowful mother. He was certainly cradled in affliction, and as an eminent follower of him who was a Man of sorrows, he doubtless was chosen in the furnace of affliction, and through much tribulation entered the kingdom of heaven. His very petition, "Keep me from evil that it may not grieve me," shows that he knew what grief and trouble of soul were.

"And Jabez called on the God of Israel." From this we gather that he had a spiritual, experimental knowledge of the God of Israel. He did not worship "an unknown God," like the Athenians; nor the God of creation, like the Deist; nor the God of his own fancy, like the Pharisee; nor the God of universal love and mercy, like the Arminian; but "the God of Israel," that is, God in covenant with a peculiar people--Israel being "his inheritance," Isa 19:25; the object of his eternal love, Mal 1:2; and "his peculiar treasure," Ps 135:4. This was the God before whom he bowed down to worship in spirit and in truth, and at whose mercy-seat he poured forth the desire of his soul in the prayer left here upon record.

But how came he to call upon the God of Israel? Before he could call upon him he must know him, and this could only be by some personal manifestation of him. To read of him in the Scriptures--to hear of him from the mouth of others--to have received a traditionary knowledge of him from parents or instructors--to have the natural conscience impressed with a sense of his being and universal presence, all fall very short of a personal, spiritual, supernatural manifestation of him to the soul. When a ray of divine light shines into the heart out of the fullness of the Godhead, then and then only do we know him aright, then and then only can we be said to know him at all. To know him thus, so as to see him in the light of his own countenance, to feel his gracious presence shed abroad, and to be drawn up into some secret and close communion with him, is a part of that eternal life, of which the Lord has said, "This is life eternal, that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," John 17:3.

Jabez, then, being brought into this spiritual knowledge of the God of Israel, comes into his gracious presence under the special anointings and teachings of the Holy Spirit, and bowing down with solemn prostration of spirit before the throne of majesty and mercy, pours forth the desires and breathings of his soul in such words as the blessed Spirit indited. Were it not so, this prayer would not have been left recorded in the pages of inspired truth. But if this be the case, then, if we live under the same heavenly teaching, if the same blessed inward Intercessor pray in us, the desire and breathings of our soul will correspond to the desires and breathings of the soul of Jabez. And this prayer seems to have been left upon record as a model, a pattern of spiritual breathings, a cast as it were from the inward mold, a putting into a tangible visible shape that which transpires in the secret chambers of the heart.

We will, then, without any formal divisions, simply endeavor to travel through the petitions offered up in this prayer of Jabez; and may the Lord enable us to see our faces reflected therein, for if our hearts are filled with the same desires, and we pray under the same heavenly operations, the same blessed answer is annexed to our petitions which was annexed to his.

I. What was his first request? "Oh, that you would bless me indeed!" There are many apparent blessings which are real curses; many apparent curses which are real blessings; and many blessings which are both apparent and real.

1. Thus HEALTH is apparently one of the greatest natural blessings, but it often proves a real curse. Its strong tendency is to remove far away all thoughts of death and eternity; to make a man more or less satisfied with the things of time and sense; to encourage building up earthly paradises and castles in the air; and to draw comfort and happiness from the creature instead of the Creator. He who lives in the enjoyment of uninterrupted health, through whose arteries the vigorous blood freely courses, has all his passions strong, all his animal spirits high, and this full tide of life brings with it a cheerfulness and happiness, which, unless he be well ballasted and weighted in other ways, makes him satisfied with life from the very hue that it wears. Strong health brings with it strong lusts, and feeds the old nature, which is to be mortified and crucified. Thus this great apparent blessing may prove a real curse.

2. So MONEY. How often is the poor distressed child of God longing for a large slice of this great apparent blessing, and perhaps envying this or that rich professor! But this is often a real curse. How continually do we see it shut up the heart, stiffen the pride, become a temptation and a snare, and draw aside even God's children into many foolish and hurtful lusts, feeding the love of the world and the desires of the flesh and of the mind. He felt this who asked for neither poverty nor riches, "lest he should become full and deny God."

3. So the good opinion and PRAISE OF MEN. This is eagerly sought for as a blessing, but often proves a real curse. Even God's children are often much tempted to seek the applause of the creature, and derive comfort and support from the good opinion of others, instead of seeking that testimony, which the Spirit bears in the conscience. But what is that religion worth which is built upon the good opinion of a man that shall die? One puff of the fiery furnace will burn all such props up. And yet we are often galled, fretted, and mortified by the harsh opinions and unkind speeches which are passed upon us and uttered against us.

4. But there are apparent curses which often are real blessings. A languishing, AFFLICTED STATE OF HEALTH, so trying and so painful to the flesh, often proves in God's hands a real blessing. It tends to make the world bitter, pulls down airy visions of happiness sought outside of God, brings solemn thoughts into the soul, and weans the heart from idols. Not that it can do any one of these things, but the Lord uses it as his instrument.

5. So POVERTY is often made a real blessing to a child of God, by being a means of keeping him dependent upon the God of providence as well as the God of grace, and thus leading him into that close waiting upon the Lord, and crying and sighing to him for deliverance, which none but the poor can know. And when the answer comes, he blesses and praises him with joyful lips, and feels a gratitude and love which is in proportion to his former trials.

6. So the scourge of the tongue shall drive a man nearer the Lord; the doubt cast upon his religion shall make him more earnest to make his calling and election sure; and the arrows of slander and calumny shall make him cautious and circumspect. Having all his family against him, perhaps opposing his religion as the source of all their troubles, and he having to stand a poor isolated being in the midst of children and relations--this apparent curse upon his family shall prove a real blessing to a child of God, and lead him from the creature to the Creator, from broken cisterns to the fountain of living waters, and from idols to the God and Father of the Lord Jesus.

But there are blessings which are both apparent and real. When I say apparent, I mean so only to those who have eyes to see them and hearts to desire them. These blessings Jabez desired, "blessings indeed:" not apparent blessings and real curses, not apparent curses and real blessings, but blessings stamped as such, and coming down into his soul as manifested blessings from the Lord of life and glory. No other could satisfy his soul. All but blessings indeed left him barren, naked, and empty. Let us look at some of these blessings indeed.

7. The fear of the Lord in the soul is a blessing indeed, as being the beginning of wisdom, and therefore the beginning of all other manifested blessings. But why should Jabez be panting after this blessing? Because he knew and felt that if he were wrong here, he was wrong everywhere. He had, doubtless, felt too that from lack of the exercise of this godly fear he had often gone astray. We live in a world where snares of every kind are spread for our feet, and into which we must fall, if left to ourselves. Feeling, then, his own helplessness and headlong proneness to all evil, Jabez was crying out for this as a real

manifested blessing.

Some intimation of God's favor, some soft and gentle whisper of love, some token for good, some living sense of his blessed presence, some solemn dropping down of the dew of mercy, some witness of the Spirit to our spirit that we are born of God, is a blessing indeed. To have peace with God, and feel an inward sense of reconciliation, whereby we are spiritually assured that "fury is not in him," but that he is our Father and our friend, is a blessing indeed. To have our evidences brightened, doubts and fears removed, our hopes strengthened, and our longing expectation of future bliss encouraged and shone upon, is a blessing indeed.

And yet these seem, sweet though they be, all to fall short of that greatest and best of all blessings--a sweet manifestation and revelation of Christ to the soul. Those who are brought into bondage and guilt through the application of the law to their consciences, as the Holy Spirit leads them out in earnest desires and breathings, feel that the greatest blessing which God can bestow upon them would be to "reveal his Son in them," Ga 1:16, and form "Christ in their heart, as the hope of glory," Col 1:27. They at times are earnestly longing to feel his blood sprinkled on their conscience, and to have such a manifestation of his glorious and lovely person to their soul, that they may embrace him with every affection of their renewed spirit, cleave to him with purpose of heart, and enjoy him as eternally theirs.

It is by these holy and fervent longings of the renewed spirit after Christ, that the living convictions wrought in the souls of the elect by the Holy Spirit, are distinguished from the slavish fears and remorseful convictions that are in the reprobate. This blessed Teacher has in some measure held up Christ before the eyes of their mind, and kindled some degree of affection towards him; and thus they cannot be satisfied with Christ in the Bible, Christ in doctrine and speculation, Christ at a distance, unfelt, unseen, unenjoyed; but are, each according to their measure, at times earnestly suing and begging for him to come into their heart, and take full possession of their soul.

Now, in answer to these fervent cries, the Holy Spirit will sometimes bring the blessing just as it were within sight. Like a gallant ship, the soul seems sometimes just about to shoot into harbor, when just as she nears the pier-head, a gust off shore beats her back, and she must again struggle with the winds and waves. But all these disappointments serve only to quicken the desires of the longing spirit, and under these feelings by night and by day, at home and abroad, in the daily business and the solitary walk, there will be the earnest cry of the soul to have this best and greatest of manifested blessings.

But again, where this blessing is delayed, or seemingly denied, there will be such a sinking down of soul into doubt and fear that it will be crying after lower evidences of interest in Christ. Great poverty makes a small coin acceptable where a larger is denied. Thus in deep soul-poverty one word from God, one look, one smile would seem ample. The scales seem at times so evenly poised between life and death that a grain would decide the matter. When all is crooked one word would set matters straight. But, that such a wretch and filthy monster of iniquity should have a smile from the great and holy Jehovah seems a blessing too great, but would be "a blessing indeed."

Again to rest with confidence upon the Lord, and to believe that however dark matters are, he will appear; to trust when we cannot perceive him, to hope against hope and believe against unbelief, and thus through faith and patience become followers of those who inherit the promises, this is a blessing indeed. So to be weaned from idols, delivered from broken cisterns, separated in spirit and affection from the world, and have our heart fixed on things above, is a blessing indeed.

To feel an appetite after God's word, to receive the truth in the love of it, to have sweet and holy communion with the three-one Jehovah, and to live under the solemn anointings of the blessed Spirit is a blessing indeed. In a word every spiritual blessing that God has blessed his church with in Christ, is such a blessing as Jabez panted after--every blessing that God can give or the soul receive--everything that comes down from heaven and leads to heaven--everything that fits the soul for trials here and bliss hereafter--everything upon which God has put his own stamp and set his own seal, is "a blessing indeed."

II. But we must proceed to the second petition of Jabez: "And enlarge my coast." What coast was this? I believe it was the limit of his experience, the line of life drawn out by the Holy Spirit on his heart and conscience. A coast means a boundary line, such as divides one territory from another, or terminates a country, as the sea coast is the boundary of our island. Every quickened soul, then, has a coast; that is a territory of inward experience, which is limited and bounded by the line that the Holy Spirit has drawn in his conscience.

Some, for instance, have a narrow experience--a slip, as it were, of spiritual territory. They cannot get much beyond doubts and fears, and guilt and convictions, with, at times, earnest desires for mercy and pardon. Others have their coast a little more extended. The blessed Spirit has moved the line a little farther, and taken in a somewhat larger territory. These are enabled to hope in God's mercy, and anchor in his promises. Others can through faith rest in Christ's blood and righteousness, having received some intimation of favor, but not brought out into the liberty of the gospel. In these the coast has been carried out farther still, and the line embraces a larger space. Others are brought into the light, life, liberty, joy, and peace of the glorious gospel of the Son of God. In these the coast of spiritual experience is still more widely allotted, and they can say, "The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yes, I have a goodly heritage," Ps 16:6.

As the Lord divided the tribes, to cast their inheritance by line, Ps 78:55, so has he cast the lot for every vessel of mercy, and his hand has divided it unto them by line. Isa 34:17. This is as it were the tether which fastens down every quickened soul to his own appointed portion of inward experience. Within this tether he may walk, feed, and lie down. It is "the food convenient for him," the strip of pasture allotted him. He cannot, he dare not break this tether, which is fastened round a tender conscience, and every stretching forth beyond his measure to boast in another man's line of things, cuts into and galls this tender conscience. He may indeed, and often will, wear this pasture bare by treading so much and so long within the narrow circle, and may reach forth his neck sometimes to nibble a few blades of grass a little beyond his strip, yet will he not break his tether to rush uninvited into the green pastures.

A child of God is not like the wild donkey, of which we read that "the range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searches after every green thing," Job 39:8. A living soul cannot thus "snuff up the wilderness at his pleasure," Jer 2:24, "regarding not the crying of the driver;" nor run loose into the field of doctrine, rolling himself amid the thick grass and flowers of promises and gospel truths, and "feeding himself without fear." No; he must have the stake pulled up, and the tether lengthened, and be led by his master into just such a portion as he sees good to give him.

Nor, again, will a living soul be satisfied with a narrow, circumscribed experience. Some seem well contented to be as they are, and have no wish to have a better or more enlarged experience than they think they possess. The old strip round which they have walked twenty years until it is threadbare, amply suffices them. But it is a different thing to break through the tether from presumption, and lie still on the bare ground through sloth. The living soul cannot but earnestly desire to have his coast enlarged. More

light, more life, more feeling, more liberty, more knowledge of God in Christ, more faith, hope, and love. To have his narrow, contracted, shut up heart, enlarged in prayer, in meditation, in communion, in affection to the people of God. He is not satisfied with the scanty pasture allotted him, but desires a larger measure of heavenly teaching, to be indulged with more filial confidence in, and access unto God, and to be more delivered from that fear which has torment. "God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem," Ge 9:27.

"I will run the way of your commandments, when you shall enlarge my heart," Ps 119:32. This enlargement of their border the Lord had sworn to Israel, and to give them all the land which he had promised unto their fathers, De 19:8; and therefore when he had said, "Sing, O barren, you that did not bear," he adds, "enlarge the place of your tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of your habitation; spare not, lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes," Isa 54:1,2.

Have you any of these fervent desires after light, love, and liberty, that the world, pride, lust, unbelief, covetousness, and carnality may not shut up your heart, but that you may know the love of Christ that passes knowledge, so as to be filled with all the fullness of God? These are good desires, and very different from rushing presumptuously forward, and chattering about liberty, while you are slaves of corruption. It is one thing to look through the fence, and another to enjoy the estate; but it is far better to look through the fences with wishful desires, than to break down the fence as a trespasser. To look upon the coffer is not to be put into possession of the writings, but it is better to wait and cry for the key of David, than break it open, and steal the deeds. And he that is kept in that narrow, narrow path between sloth and presumption will be at solemn seasons crying out with Jabez: "Oh, that you would enlarge my coast!"

III. "And that your hand might be with me." This is the third petition of this heard and answered prayer. Jabez was not for rushing presumptuously on in his temporal concerns more than in his spiritual. Without some divine leading or intimation of God's will he was afraid to step forward. But why this holy caution and anxious desire for the hand of God to go out before him, and be with him? Because he had proved by painful experience, that where the beginning of a thing is not from God, he could not expect the middle to be from God, nor the end. What, indeed, we undertake from carnal motives and selfish ends, God may, and doubtless will, overrule to his own glory and our good, but we shall have small comfort from it by the way. Having smarted, then, from his carnality and self-seeking for by painful experience is this lesson learned, Jabez now wanted to see the Lord's hand stretched out to show him the way, and keep him in it.

The burnt child dreads the fire; and thus feeling all to be wrong, and to go wrong where the Lord's hand is not, the living soul fears to be left to itself. It is not the bare, dry, letter-truth of God's special providence that will satisfy one jealous over himself with godly jealousy. This will do for a professor; but a living child desires to see and feel a fatherly hand with him and over him, going before him temporally, holding him up spiritually, clearing his path, removing all difficulties, and giving him testimonies that what is done in his fear shall terminate in his approbation. If this hand be with us, all is well; if not with us, or against us, all is ill.

Our enemies cannot hurt us if the Lord be on our side; our difficulties, however great, shall not ruin us if his hand be with us; our lusts and temptations shall not prevail, if he stretch forth his hand; and our base and filthy hearts shall not sink us into eternal dismay, if the everlasting arms are underneath. He, then, that can wait and watch the Lord's hand, and only moves when that hand leads forward, will not go astray. But it is the self-loathing and condemnation, the smart and wound of having so rashly and obstinately followed our own ways, that will make us cry feelingly and frequently, "that your hand may be with me."

IV. The last petition of Jabez is, "And that you would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me." It is indeed a base misrepresentation of the doctrines of grace to say that they lead to licentiousness. However ungodly men abuse and pervert them, such is not their effect or tendency in a living soul. I believe that every child of God will be more or less frequently offering up this prayer of Jabez, "That you would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me." He is not one of those who say, "never mind; sin cannot damn me, nor cut me out of the covenant;" but having his heart tender before God and his conscience alive in his fear, knowing something of the terrors of the Lord, and something too of his goodness, he desires to be kept from evil as being hateful to God, and grievous to his own soul. Sin indulged had brought pain and grief into his heart, had cut deep wounds in his conscience, and burdened him sorely; and remembering the wormwood and the gall, he cried to be kept from it for the future.

Shun as you would a pestilence any one who makes light of sin. Be assured such have never seen or known God, nor Jesus Christ whom he has sent. Had they seen light in God's light, had their secret sins been set in the light of his countenance, or had they ever seen by faith a crucified Lord, they would not, they dare not, speak lightly of that which has been so signally stamped with the wrath of the Father, and suffering of the Son. He who has not been brought to abhor himself in dust and ashes has never seen God, and has only heard of him by the hearing of the ear, Job 42:5,6. Sin is a grief, a burden to every living soul, and when fallen into, cuts his tender conscience, and wounds his mind.

But the expression, "And that you would keep me from evil," implies that Jabez was a poor burdened sinner who could not keep himself. If he could keep himself, this petition would be an idle mockery. He need not to have fallen outwardly to teach him this. There are inward falls, slips of the tongue, glances of the eye, filthy desires, roving imaginations, covetous projects, proud desires, idolatrous lustings, secret backslidings into carnality and worldliness. Jabez does not pray, keep me from evil that it may not disgrace me or expose me, lest it wound my fair fame or gratify my enemies, but that it may not grieve me--that it may not prove an inward source of trouble, may not intercept communion, bar access, bring a cloud before the mercy-seat, rankle in me so as to produce guilt and terror, may not bring down heavy chastisements, and make me a limping cripple all my days. He was not one of those who can be very pious openly, and very impious secretly, a whited sepulcher fair without, and within full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

"And God granted him that which he requested." That was the best of all. It is not prayer, but the answer to prayer that brings the blessing. "A man has joy by the answer of his mouth," Pr 15:23. And it was Jabez's mercy not merely to pray for spiritual blessings, but to have them richly bestowed. The Lord did bless him indeed, did enlarge his coast, guided him with his hand, and kept him from evil.

In drawing this feeble portrait of Jabez, I have also described, however faintly and imperfectly, the desires and breathings of the people of God. But remember that I have not said that they are always in this state. Had I said so, if I know any of these things by experience, I should have told a lie, and the very worst of all lies a pulpit lie. It is only at certain seasons, rare and solemn moments, under the special visitations and overshadowings of the blessed Spirit, that the people of God thus pour out their hearts before him.

There are many times when it seems as if this present world could satisfy us, when we build up our earthly paradises, and seek as it were ease and rest here below. But the voice soon comes, "Arise and depart, for this is not your rest." As the Holy Spirit brooded over the dark waters of chaos, so will he sometimes brood over the soul, infusing life and feeling, and drawing forth earnest desires such as passed through the soul of Jabez; and then it seems as if nothing would or could satisfy us but a blessed answer.

Let me, then, ask you a few questions. Do you know the God of Israel by his own manifestations? Do you call upon him in solemn moments of secret supplication, when every thought lies open to his eye, and your whole soul seems prostrate before him, as if he and you were alone on the earth? Are you seeking real blessings at his hand, blessings indeed! Are you crying to him to enlarge your coast? Or are you well satisfied with your present attainments, looking down upon others as babes, while you know all that is to be known. If you are sitting in the easy chair of the sluggard, or roaming over the 'mountains of presumption', you desire no spiritual enlargement of heart.

But if you are a poor burdened cripple, that would gladly enjoy light, love, and liberty, I well know you are sometimes pouring out your soul, if not in the words in the meaning of them, "Oh, that you would enlarge my coast!" Can you rush headlong into every scheme without seeking the Lord's sanction and guiding hand? Then you have not the heart nor cry of Jabez. And can you go to the very borders of evil, or even dally with sin, sheltering yourself under the falls of saints, without any groans for the past or cries for the future? Can you without piercing pangs of conscience indulge bosom sins, and go recklessly on in base lusts? Then you give little evidence that you are under such teachings as Jabez was favored with.

I know by painful experience what man's base heart is, but I believe I know also something of the desires and breathings of Jabez, to be delivered from the dominion of evil, and if I did not, I should conclude that I was dead in sin. One word more and I have done. If the Lord the Spirit has breathed into our souls the same hungerings and thirstings, longings and desires that he communicated to the soul of Jabez, a similar answer is annexed in the secret counsels of God to them, and when that answer comes with power, it will make us willing to crown Jesus Lord of all.

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