

LITTLE PRAYER, GIANT PRIZE

Jabez called on the God of Israel.

The little book you're holding is about what happens when ordinary Christians decide to reach for an extraordinary life—which, as it turns out, is exactly the kind God promises.

My own story starts in a kitchen with yellow counters and Texas-sized raindrops pelting the window. It was my senior year of seminary in Dallas. Darlene, my wife, and I were finding ourselves spending more and more time thinking and praying about what would come next. Where should I throw my energy, passion, and training? What did God want for us as a couple? I stood in our kitchen thinking again about a challenge I'd heard from the seminary chaplain, Dr. Richard Seume. "Want a bigger vision for your life?" he had asked earlier that week. "Sign up to be a gimper for God."

A gimper, as Seume explained it, was someone who always does a little more than what's required or

expected. In the furniture business, for example, gimping is putting the finishing touches on the upholstery, patiently applying the ornamental extras that are a mark of quality and value.

Dr. Seume took as his text the briefest of Bible biographies: "Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers" (1 Chronicles 4:9). Jabez wanted to be more and do more for God, and—as we discover by the end of verse 10—God granted him his request.

What sentence

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The cry of a

gimper named

Jabez.

Jabez's miniprofile in the Bible?

Maybe it was the raindrops running down the windowpanes. Suddenly my thoughts ran past verse 9.

I picked up my Bible and read verse 10—the prayer of Jabez. Something in his prayer would explain

the mystery. It had to. Pulling a chair up to the yellow counter, I bent over my Bible, and reading the prayer over and over, I searched with all my heart for the future God had for someone as ordinary as I.

The next morning, I prayed Jabez's prayer word for word.

And the next.

And the next.

Thirty years later, I haven't stopped.

If you were to ask me what sentence—other than my prayer for salvation—has revolutionized my life and ministry the most, I would tell you that it was the cry of a gimper named Jabez, who is still remembered not for what he did, but for what he prayed—and for what happened next.

In the pages of this little book, I want to introduce you to the amazing truths in Jabez's prayer for blessing and prepare you to expect God's astounding answers to it as a *regular part of your life experience*.

How do I know that it will significantly impact you? Because of my experience and the testimony of hundreds of others around the world with whom I've shared these principles. Because, even more importantly, the

Jabez prayer distills God's powerful will for your future. Finally, because it reveals that your Father longs to give you so much more than you may have ever thought to ask for.

Just ask the man who had no future.

THE PRODIGY OF THE GENEALOGY

Someone once said there is really very little difference between people—but that little difference makes a great



deal of difference. Jabez doesn't stand astride the Old Testament like a Moses or a David or light up the book of Acts like those early Christians who turned the world upside down. But one thing is sure: The little difference in his life made all the difference.

You could think of him as the Prodigy of the Genealogy, or maybe the Bible's Little Big Man. You'll find him hiding in the least-read section of one of the least-read books of the Bible.

The first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles are taken up with the official family tree of the Hebrew tribes, beginning with Adam and proceeding through thou-

sands of years to Israel's return from captivity. Talk about boring! The long lists of unfamiliar and difficult names—more than five hundred of them—are likely to make even the bravest Bible student turn back.

Take chapter 4. *The descendants of Judah: Perez, Hezron, and Carmi, and Hur, and Shobal....* And that's just the beginning.

Ahumai

Ishma

Idbash

Hazeleponi

Anub...

I'd forgive you if you suddenly considered putting this little book aside and reaching for your TV remote. But stay with me. Because forty-four names into the chapter, a story suddenly breaks through:

Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain." And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be

with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!" So God granted him what he requested. (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

In the next verse, the roll call for the tribe of Judah picks up as if nothing has happened—*Chelub, Shuah, Mehir...*

Something about this man Jabez had caused the historian to pause in mid-drone, clear his throat, and switch tactics. "Ah, wait a minute!" he seems to interject. "You just *gotta* know something about this guy named Jabez. He stands head and shoulders above the rest!"

What was the secret to the enduring reputation of Jabez? You can search from front to back in your Bible, as I have, and you won't find any more information than we have in these two brief verses:

- Things started badly for a person no one had ever heard of.
- He prayed an unusual, one-sentence prayer.

- Things ended extraordinarily well.

Clearly, the outcome can be traced to his prayer. Something about Jabez's simple, direct request to God changed his life and left a permanent mark on the history books of Israel.

Oh, that You would bless me indeed,
and enlarge my territory,
that Your hand would be with me,
and that You would keep me from evil.

At first glance, the four requests may strike you as sincere, sensible, even noble, but not terribly remarkable. Yet just under the surface of each lies a giant paradigm breaker that runs exactly opposite to the way you and I usually think. In the pages to come, I want to show you just how dramatically each of Jabez's requests can release something miraculous in your life.

LIVING BEYOND THE LIMITS

When was the last time God worked through you in such a way that you knew beyond doubt that God had

done it? In fact, when was the last time you saw miracles happen on a regular basis in *your* life? If you're like most believers I've met, you wouldn't know how to ask for that kind of experience, or even if you should.

What I have to share with you has been opening up lives to God's mighty working for many years. Recently, I was in Dallas to teach on the Jabez blessing to an audi-



ence of 9,000. Later over lunch, a man said to me, "Bruce, I heard you preach the message of Jabez fifteen years ago, and I haven't stopped praying it. The change has been so overwhelming I have just never stopped."

Across the table, another friend agreed. He said he'd been praying Jabez's little prayer for ten years with similar results. The man next to him, a heart surgeon from Indianapolis, said he had been praying it for five.

I told them, "Friends, I've been praying Jabez for more than *half* my life!"

Because you're reading this book, I believe you share my desire to reach for a life that will be "more hon-

orable" for God. Not that you wish others to reach for less, but for you, nothing but God's fullest blessing will do. When you stand before Him to give your accounting, your deepest longing is to hear, "Well done!"

God really does have unclaimed blessings waiting for you, my friend. I know it sounds impossible—even embarrassingly suspicious in our self-serving day. Yet that very exchange—your want for God's plenty—has been His loving will for your life from eternity past. And with a handful of core commitments on your part, you can proceed from this day forward with the confidence and expectation that your heavenly Father will bring it to pass for you.

Think of it this way: Instead of standing near the river's edge, asking for a cup of water to get you through each day, you'll do something unthinkable—you will take the little prayer with the giant prize and *jump into the river!* At that moment, you will begin to let the loving currents of God's grace and power carry you along. God's great plan for you will surround you and sweep you forward into the profoundly important and satisfying life He has waiting.

If that is what you want, keep reading.

SO WHY NOT ASK?

Oh, that you would bless me indeed!

You're at a spiritual retreat in the mountains with others who want to experience a fuller Christian life. For the duration of the retreat everyone has been matched with a mentor. Yours is in his seventies, and he's been touching lives for God longer than you've been alive.

On the way to the showers the first morning, you walk past his room. His door is ajar, and he has just knelt down to pray. You can't resist. *How exactly does a giant of the faith begin his prayers?* you wonder.

You pause and lean closer. Will he pray for revival? Pray for the hungry around the world? Pray for you?

But this is what you hear: "O Lord, I beg you first and most this morning, please bless...*me!*"

Startled at such a selfish prayer, you pad down the hall to your shower. But as you're adjusting the water

temperature, a thought hits you. It's so obvious, you can't believe you haven't thought it before:

Great men of the faith think differently than the rest of us.

By the time you're dressed and heading for breakfast, you're sure of it. The reason some men and women of faith rise above the rest, you decide, is that they think and pray differently than those around them.

Is it possible that God wants you to be "selfish" in your prayers? To ask for more—and more again—from your Lord? I've met so many earnest

Christians who take it as a sign of immaturity to think such thoughts. They assume they'll seem impolite or greedy if they ask God for too many blessings.

Maybe you think like that. If you do, I want to show you that such a prayer is not the self-centered act it might appear, but a supremely spiritual one and exactly the kind of request our Father longs to hear.

First, let's take a closer look at Jabez's story.



Is it possible that God wants you to be more "selfish" in your prayers?

NOT PAIN, BUT GAIN

As far as we can tell, Jabez lived in southern Israel after the conquest of Canaan and during the time of the judges. He was born into the tribe of Judah and eventually became the notable head of a clan. Yet his story really begins with his name: "His mother called his name Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him in pain.'"

In Hebrew, the word *Jabez* means "pain." A literal rendering could read, "He causes (or will cause) pain."



Doesn't sound like the start of a promising life, does it?

He grew up

with a name

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to hate.

All babies arrive with a certain amount of pain, but something about Jabez's birth went beyond the usual—so much so that his mother chose to memorialize it in her son's name.

Why? The pregnancy or the delivery may have been traumatic. Perhaps the baby was born breech. Or perhaps the mother's pain was emotional—maybe the child's father abandoned her during the pregnancy; maybe he had died; maybe the family had fallen into such financial straits that the prospect of another mouth to feed brought only fear and worry.

Only God knows for sure what caused the pain of this anguished mother. Not that it made much difference to young Jabez. He grew up with a name any boy would love to hate. Imagine if you had to go through childhood enduring the teasing of bullies, the daily reminders of your unwelcome arrival, and mocking questions like, "So, young man, what was your mother thinking?"

Yet by far the heaviest burden of Jabez's name was how it defined his future. In Bible times, a man and his name were so intimately related that "to cut off the name" of an individual amounted to the same thing as killing him. A name was often taken as a wish for or prophecy about the child's future. For example, Jacob can mean "grabber," a good one-word biography for that scheming patriarch. Naomi and her husband named their two sons Mahlon and Chilion. Translation? "Puny" and "pining." And that was exactly what they were. Both of them died in early adulthood. Solomon means "peace," and sure enough, he became the first king of Israel to reign without going to war. A name that meant "pain" didn't bode well for Jabez's future.

Despite his dismal prospects, Jabez found a way

out. He had grown up hearing about the God of Israel who had freed his forefathers from slavery, rescued them from powerful enemies, and established them in a land of plenty.



By the time he was an adult, Jabez believed and fervently hoped in this God of miracles and new beginnings.

*When we ask
God's blessing,
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for more of
what we could
get for
ourselves.*

So why not ask for one?

That's what he did. He prayed the biggest, most improbable request imaginable:

"Oh, that You would bless me *indeed*..."!

I love the urgency, the personal vulnerability of his plea. In Hebrew, adding "indeed" to this prayer was like adding five exclamation points, or writing the request in capital letters and underlining it.

In my mind's eye, I picture Jabez standing before a massive gate recessed into a sky-high wall. Weighed down by the sorrow of his past and the dreariness of his present, he sees before him only impossibility—a future shut off. But raising his hands to heaven, he cries out, "Father, oh, Father! Please bless me! And what I really mean is... bless me a lot!"

With the last word, the transformation begins. He hears a tremendous crack. Then a groan. Then a rumble as the huge gate swings away from him in a wide arc. There, stretching to the horizon, are fields of blessings. And Jabez steps forward into another life.

BLESSING IS NOT ABOUT SNEEZING

Before we can ask for God's blessing with confidence, we need a clear understanding of what the word means. We hear "bless" or "blessing" intoned from every pulpit. We ask God to bless the missionaries, the kids, and the food we're about to eat. It's something Grandma says when she hears you sneeze.

No wonder the meaning of blessing gets watered down to something vague and innocuous like "Have a nice day." No wonder so many Christians aren't as desperate as Jabez was to receive it!

To bless in the biblical sense means to ask for or to impart supernatural favor. When we ask for God's blessing, we're not asking for more of what we could get for ourselves. We're crying out for the wonderful, unlimited goodness that only God has the power to know about or give to us. This kind of richness is what

the writer was referring to in Proverbs: "The Lord's blessing is our greatest wealth; all our work adds nothing to it" (Proverbs 10:22, TLB).

Notice a radical aspect of Jabez's request for blessing: *He left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessings would be and where, when, and how Jabez would receive them.* This kind of radical trust in God's good intentions toward us has nothing in common with the popular gospel that you should ask God for a Cadillac, a six-figure income, or some other material sign that you have found a way to cash in on your connection with Him. Instead, the Jabez blessing focuses like a laser on our wanting for ourselves nothing more and nothing less than what God wants for us.

When we seek God's blessing as the ultimate value in life, we are throwing ourselves entirely into the river of His will and power and purposes for us. All our other needs become secondary to what we really want—which is to become wholly immersed in what God is trying to do in us, through us, and around us for His glory.

Let me tell you a guaranteed by-product of sincerely seeking His blessing: Your life will become

marked by miracles. How do I know? Because He promises it, and I've seen it happen in my own! God's power to accomplish great things suddenly finds no obstruction in you. You're moving in His direction. You're praying for exactly what God desires. Suddenly the unhindered forces of heaven can begin to accomplish God's perfect will—through you. And you will be the first to notice!

But there's a catch.

MR. JONES GOES TO HEAVEN

What if you found out that God had it in mind to send you twenty-three specific blessings today, but you got only one? What do you suppose the reason would be?

There's a little fable about a Mr. Jones who dies and goes to heaven. Peter is waiting at the gates to give him a tour. Amid the splendor of golden streets, beautiful mansions, and choirs of angels that Peter shows him, Mr. Jones notices an odd-looking building. He thinks it looks like an enormous warehouse—it has no windows and only one door. But when he asks to see inside, Peter hesitates. "You really don't want to see what's in there," he tells the new arrival.

Why would there be any secrets in heaven? Jones wonders. What incredible surprise could be waiting for me in there? When the official tour is over he's still wondering, so he asks again to see inside the structure.

Finally Peter relents. When the apostle opens the door, Mr. Jones almost knocks him over in his haste to enter. It turns out that the enormous building is filled with row after row of shelves, floor to ceiling, each stacked neatly with white boxes tied in red ribbons.



"These boxes all have names on them,"

Mr. Jones muses.

Turning to Peter

he asks,

"Do I have one?"

"Yes, you do." Peter tries to guide Mr. Jones back outside. "Frankly," Peter says, "if I were you...." But Mr.

Jones is already dashing toward the "J" aisle to find his box.

Peter follows, shaking his head. He catches up with Mr. Jones just as he is slipping the red ribbon off his box and popping the lid. Looking inside, Jones has a

moment of instant recognition, and he lets out a deep sigh like the ones Peter has heard so many times before.

Because there in Mr. Jones's white box are all the blessings that God wanted to give to him while he was on earth...but Mr. Jones had never asked.

"Ask," promised Jesus, "and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). "You do not have because you do not ask," said James (James 4:2). Even though there is no limit to God's goodness, if you didn't ask Him for a blessing yesterday, you didn't get all that you were supposed to have.

That's the catch—if you don't ask for His blessing, you forfeit those that come to you only when you ask. In the same way that a father is honored to have a child beg for his blessing, your Father is delighted to respond generously when His blessing is what you covet most.

GOD'S NATURE IS TO BLESS

Perhaps you think that your name is just another word for pain or trouble, or that the legacy you have been handed from your family circumstances is nothing but a liability. You just don't feel like a candidate for blessing.

Or perhaps you're one of those Christians who thinks that once you're saved, God's blessings sort of drizzle over your life at a predetermined rate, no matter what you do. No extra effort required.

Or perhaps you have slipped into a ledger-keeping mindset with God. In your blessings account you have a column for deposits and one for withdrawals. Has



God been unusually kind to you lately? Then you think that you shouldn't expect, much less ask for, Him to credit your account. You might even think He should ignore you for a while, or even debit your account by sending some trouble your way.

This kind of thinking is a sin and a trap! When Moses said to God on Mount Sinai, "Show me Your glory" (Exodus 33:18), he was asking for a more intimate understanding of God. In response, God described Himself as "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth" (34:6).

Incredible! The very nature of God is to have goodness in so much abundance that it overflows into

our unworthy lives. If you think about God in any other way than that, I'm asking you to change the way you think. Why not make it a lifelong commitment to ask God every day to bless you—and while He's at it, bless you a lot?

God's bounty is limited only by us, not by His resources, power, or willingness to give. Jabez was blessed simply because he refused to let any obstacle, person, or opinion loom larger than God's nature. And God's nature is to bless.

His kindness in recording Jabez's story in the Bible is proof that it's not who you are, or what your parents decided for you, or what you were "fated" to be that counts. What counts is knowing who you want to be and asking for it.

Through a simple, believing prayer, you can change your future. You can change what happens one minute from now.