

## What Should We Make of *The Prayer of Jabez*?

The number one book in America, on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks now, is a little book (92 pages) on prayer published by Multnomah (Sisters, Oregon, 2000). I refer, of course, to *The Prayer of Jabez*, written by well-known Christian writer, Dr. Bruce Wilkinson. The sales of the book, which the publisher anticipated to some extent, are mind boggling within the industry.

If one purpose of a book review is to alert people to an important work that they might consider reading then this review certainly does not need to do this since so many have already read Bruce Wilkinson's phenomenally popular work. (A sequel was recently released and listed at number ten in its first week on the *New York Times* bestseller list!)

Wilkinson, the founder and president of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, describes a four-fold process to blessing. His text is an unfamiliar passage in I Chronicles 4:9,10. It is the prayer in this passage that Wilkinson has faithfully prayed for the past thirty years. Wilkinson believes this particular prayer "contains *the key* to a life of extraordinary favor" (emphasis mine). Next to the salvation prayer, Jabez's prayer has "revolutionized [Wilkinson's] life and ministry the most..."

There is no doubt that many Christians are living defeated lives. We often see little to point to that shows God's supernatural power at work in our lives. This concern is something that Wilkinson seeks to address. He rightly believes that too many of us settle for spiritual mediocrity when God has so much more to offer. Other devotional writers seek to address this concern as well, so Wilkinson's prescription to live under God's blessing is nothing new. What is novel is the passage Wilkinson picks and the way that he employs it. Unfortunately, Wilkinson's earnest and godly attempt to remind us of the incredible spiritual blessings that God wants to bestow upon us is not without its problems.

Wilkinson's exegesis of the I Chronicles 4:9,10 passage is questionable. Does the request for more land neatly translate to more ministry for post-Pentecost Christians? Clearly God wants to use us in ways that we never imagined possible, but the author's handling of this passage leaves me unconvinced that this is the proper application. My reservation over the author's exegesis can certainly be debated. Since it is not the crux of my biggest concerns, I will leave it for others to discuss more fully.

By calling the prayer of Jabez "*the key* to a life of extraordinary favor" and by saying that it is the most important prayer that the author has prayed as a Christian, makes it unwittingly look more important than any other prayer in Scripture. Personally, I have prayed dozens of other prayers in Scripture (e.g. Lord's Prayer!) and seen God do truly miraculous things in and through me—the same kinds of things that Wilkinson speaks of. Locating Jabez's prayer as the best prayer for supernatural blessing results in the diminishment of other pertinent sections of Scripture (more pertinent in my estimation) as reminders of God's desire to use us. Furthermore, God has used Bruce Wilkinson in wonderful ways *because* he is a man of faith, not because he prays a particular prayer. This crucial distinction is blurred with the attendant problem that

immature Christians will believe the prayer of Jabez to be some new, magical formula. I know this is not Mr. Wilkinson's intent, but his incautious wording leads to that conclusion.

There are a number of places where it is also unclear what the author is saying. For example, how can miracles "happen on a regular basis?" (p. 7) Aren't miracles by definition *unusual* events? Regular miracles would in fact be oxymoronic! How does the author know Jabez's inner motivations when so little (even Wilkinson admits there is little information on Jabez) is known about him? (p. 48-49) The author says "...seeking God's blessings is our ultimate act of worship..." (p. 49) This certainly raises a number of important theological questions. Another place finds Mr. Wilkinson assuming that people who indicate they want to accept Jesus Christ are clearly Christians. (p. 59) Since there are far too many people who have false assurance of right standing with God simply because they prayed a prayer, it would have been preferable for the author to say that 1200 indicated a decision for Christ, not that they were definitely Christians.

A brief comment is needed about what constitutes supernatural ministry. The exciting examples Wilkinson gives should be balanced by the reality that God-honoring ministry may come from intense suffering where it is *hard to see the effects of one's ministry*.<sup>1</sup> I am also troubled by a story in which the author decides quite arbitrarily that less than one hundred kids in each backyard Bible club should be considered "a failure." Using arbitrary numbers is nothing new in evangelicalism. I heard a lot of this in my years on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ. If we didn't reach America or the world for Christ by such and such date we just pushed back the timetable a bit further to adjust for the discrepancy. Incredibly, Mr. Wilkinson says that only four of the six clubs had one hundred kids, yet he still calls it a miracle!

Ours is a time when the church in America has an anemic theology of suffering coupled with a destructive consumerism (spiritually and materially). It is imperative therefore that we communicate in such a way that does not presume on what God may or may not do.

According to the author the reason why most Christians don't experience blessings is because they don't ask God for them. Here Wilkinson quotes Mt. 7:7,8 and James 4:2. The problem is that a very important part of the James verse and its context is left out. It is the issue of sin. James 4:3 speaks directly about those who don't get what they ask for because they have impure motives. Arguably, this is the biggest reason why most of us aren't blessed by God. This is a serious deficiency in *The Prayer of Jabez*. Though Wilkinson mentions the issue of sin in chapter 5, it is not a very clear exposition and there is not adequate connection for how it may be the very thing thwarting God's blessing.

Serious problems arise when we try to make any biblical truth *the key* to the Christian life. As I heard Major Iain Thomas of the Torchbearers say many years ago, "Ro. 5-8 is not the key to the Christian life. Neither is fasting or giving to the poor...The key to the Christian life is Jesus Christ." Even Satan knows this (II Cor. 11:3)!

I have personally benefited from the ministry of Bruce Wilkinson and Walk Thru The Bible. I also have immense respect for Dr. Wilkinson, but sadly submit that the deficiencies of *The Prayer of Jabez* are far too great to recommend it as worthwhile reading.<sup>ii</sup>

My critique of this popular book does not mean Christians should forego reading contemporary Christian literature altogether. However, given the present state of affairs in the Christian church, I have developed the following diagnostic questions which may prove useful in determining whether a book on the spiritual life is in fact worth reading.

1. Does the book convey (explicitly or implicitly) that it is the “key” to living the victorious Christian life?
2. Does the author present more of a formulaic approach to the Christian life rather than the need to grow in the “grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ?” (II Peter 3:18)
3. Does the book present a simplistic approach (read “cookie cutter”) to the Christian growth or does it value the wide variety of ways that God sanctifies His people?
4. Does the author tend to universalize or make normative his own experiences?
5. Does the author ask the reader to trust his interpretation of his experiences rather than backing those up with the word of God?
6. Most importantly, does the book focus on the person and work of Christ? In other words, is it a Christ-centered approach to the Christian life or is it a mechanical, moralistic, and behavioral approach?

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<sup>i</sup> I am grateful here to one of the students in my 11<sup>th</sup> grade Bible class, Kristen Hooper. Kristen raised some questions that helped to clarify my own concerns on this point.

<sup>ii</sup> In writing this review I have benefited from recent conversations with Jane Backus, Roger Berry, Matt Cassidy, Tony and Karen Debenport, Gil Hooper, David Lill, Barb Miaso, Dr. Robert Pyne, and my wife Doreen. This certainly does not mean to give the impression that all of these individuals agree with me on every point.