

THE JABEZ PRAYER

I CHRONICLES 4:5-12

In Washington DC, our nation's capitol, you can visit our National Archives. It's the home of an extensive collection of genealogical records. People visit the Archives to *research their roots* and *trace their family tree*. Well, in a sense, this morning's text, 1 Chronicles 1-9 is the National Archives of ancient Israel...

In the OT a person's pedigree was vitally important.

Tracing one's family tree was more than a curiosity. Your allotment of land - your social standing - often even your occupation was determined by ancestry.

To us, these genealogies may be *a bunch of boring begots* - but to the Jews they were a national treasure.

In 1 Chronicles 4 we have a list of the sons of Judah. In the first 12 verses we find 40 different names.

And our tendency would be to breeze through the *directory*. Just get *numbed by all the names*. **But remember that behind each name there was a life.**

These names belonged to people like you and me...

People with spouses, kids, jobs. People with dreams and ambitions. People who at the time performed what seemed to be important jobs, and accomplished what seemed to be monumental achievements. Some of these names may've appeared in the Jerusalem High School's yearbook as "**Most Likely to Succeed**" - or in an ancient copy of "**Who's Who in Israel.**"

Yet only one name gets little more than a mention.

It's the name, "**Jabez.**" And immediately we think, "*Of all these names, and the accomplishments behind them - why is this one man singled out for special recognition?*" What great deed did he do... Did he slay a giant? Did he build a Temple? Did he work a miracle?

The answer is "none of the above." Jabez gets extra ink, special press in God's Word simply because **he prayed!** We'll read, Jabez "**called on the God of Israel.**"

The first lesson from today's text is that in God's opinion **the achievements of his brothers were not nearly as noteworthy as the intent of Jabez' prayer.**

Look with me at 4:5. At first it's going to sound like I'm reading the telephone listings of the tribes of Israel.

Pay attention or you'll fail to catch it...

Reading this passage is like driving through a tiny town on a long trip - blink and you'll miss it. Listen closely, there's much to be learned in these few verses.

Verse 5, "**And Ashhur the father of Tekoa had two wives, Helah and Naarah. Naarah bore him Ahuzzam, Hopher, Temeni, and Haahashtari...** (what a name).

These were the sons of Naarah. The sons of Helah were Zereth, Zohar, and Ethnan; and Koz begot Anub, Zobebah, and the families of Aharhel the son of Harum. (*better get ready, for here it comes...*)

Verse 9, "**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." And immediately, the author goes back to his listing of names... "Chelub the brother of Shuhah begot Mehir, who was the father of Eshton...."

And on it goes.

The first thing to notice is this Hebrew name, "Jabez." It literally means "he causes pain." Apparently, it was a name given to him by his mom at his birth.

Either this lady had an abbreviated labor, or she was into natural childbirth. *But she was too late for the epidural.* She had a hardcore, bite-the-bullet delivery.

When the child finally arrived the doctor asked her, "Mom, what's the name?" She must've misunderstood the question, and thought he said, "how's the pain?"

The kid ended up with the name, "He's causing me pain" or "Jabez." How would you like to be stuck for a lifetime with the name "the cause of severe pain!"?

Being someone who has had to deal with an unusual first name, I can relate. One of my favorite songs growing up was by Johnny Cash, "A Boy Named Sue."

If you've forgotten, here're the lyrics, "Well, my daddy left home when I was three, and he didn't leave much to Ma and me, just this old guitar and an empty bottle of booze. Now, I don't blame him because he run and hid, but the meanest thing that he ever did was before he left, he went and named me Sue.

Well, he must have thought it was quite a joke, and it got lots of laughs from a lot of folks; it seems I had to fight my whole life through. Some gal would giggle and I'd get red, and some guy would laugh and I'd bust his head; I tell you, life ain't easy for a boy named Sue."

And it ain't much better for a boy named "*Sandy*"... By the way, you spell Sandy with a "y" not an "ie."

But if you think "*Sandy*" is a tough handle to handle, how would you like being named "*he causes pain*"?

Talk about a dark cloud hanging over your head... *Jabez' name became his biggest handicap*... Kids would be playing on the playground. When he joined them, they'd all start snickering, "*Here comes 'he causes pain' - that guy is a real Jabez in the neck.*"

Or imagine trying to get a date... what girl in her right mind would want to go out with "*he causes pain*"? - Or what about a job? Whose going to hire *a real pain*?

The only professions Jabez would qualified for would be dentistry or drill sergeant. This name was a hurdle.

Yet people with handicaps react in one of two ways. It either makes them *bitter*, like the boy named Sue, or they use their handicap to make them *better*.

They either *succumb* or *overcome*.

They either give in, and lie down, and capitulate to their handicap, and live the rest of their life bathing in a pool of self-pity... or they pull themselves up by their bootstraps and use their handicap as motivation to triumph over their deficiencies, and live a fruitful life.

Apparently, **Jabez chose to overcome!** He wanted his life to count! Read the reason for his prayer. His passion and purpose was *"that I may not cause pain."*

Rather than be a *pain in the neck*, Jabez sought to be a *pat on the back*. He wanted to be a *blessing* not a *burden* - an *encouragement* not an *encroachment*.

And what about you? Do you want to be a *blessing* or *burden*? *Someone's pain* or *someone's gain*? Don't you want your life to really count for our Lord Jesus?

When my sons were little guys, Zach, Nick, and I were playing basketball in the driveway, while Mack - a baby at the time - slept quietly upstairs in his crib.

Well, Nick, still a preschooler, insisted we get baby Mack and bring him down so he could watch us play basketball. I told him, no, *let the sleeping baby sleep!*

But Nick wouldn't take *"no"* for an answer.

Without my knowledge he walked upstairs, pulled the bean bag next to the crib, climbed into the crib, picked up his baby brother, and tossed Mack over the rail and onto the bean bag - *about a 4 foot drop* - then lugged him downstairs to watch us boys play basketball!

But what Nick did for Mack, the Holy Spirit wants to do for you at the beginning of this New Year. Some of us have been in our spiritual crib for far too long. God wants to throw us over the rail, and get us into the game. God wants your life to cause a *gain*, not a *pain*.

Nancy Jones died an elderly spinster lady, and when they went to engrave her tombstone they couldn't think of anything noteworthy to write. What had she done other than keep to herself and mind her own business?

Finally, they came up with the fitting epithet. Her tombstone read, "**Here lies the bones of Nancy Jones, for her life held no terrors. She lived an old maid, died an old maid. No hits, no runs, no errors.**" Nancy lived life, but never got into the game. Never got a hit. Never even made an error. *She lived, but made no mark!*

When you're gone, don't you want people to know you played - you contributed? I'm like Jabez, I pray daily that my life will have a positive impact on people.

Maybe you feel like you're a nuisance to people. You're more in their way, than a part of their lives.

Perhaps you consider yourself a liability to your husband, or stumbling block to your kids. When you're around your friends you always feel like a 5th wheel. Or you assume there's no place for you in your church.

Jabez prayed, and God heard his heart. God granted his request. Jabez lived a life that contradicted his name! He became *a joy, not a pain*. And I believe, God will do the same for anyone who prays his prayer...

When I find an answered prayer in the Bible I perk up. For if God was willing to answer it once, I assume He's willing to answer it again, *even in me!* I believe this is what he wants to do with this prayer. Praying **the Jabez prayer** may mark a new beginning in your life.

Notice the first of four requests: "Oh, that You would bless me indeed." "To bless" means "to show favor."

In essence Jabez is asking, "God, smile when you think of me... when you share your goodness Lord, share it with me... when you move to do a kind deed, or extend help, remember me... Lord, when you go shopping for presents, put me on your shopping list."

In the OT it was customary for a father to bestow a blessing on each of his sons. Recall the stories of Jacob and Esau or the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Here, Jabez is reminding God that he's one His kids, and as a child of God he desires his Father's blessing.

And don't think Jabez asks for a blessing because he thought he deserved it. He doesn't say, "Lord, bless me because..." He asks simply, "bless me indeed!"

In Luke 7 a Roman centurion sent the elders of the Jews to Jesus to ask Him to heal his sick servant.

Luke 7:4 reads, "When they came to Jesus, they begged Him earnestly, saying that the one for whom He should do this was worthy, 'For he loves our nation, and has built us a synagogue.'" In essence, the Jews were trying to convince Jesus that because the Roman was a good, decent guy he deserved God's help.

But Jesus suspected there was more to the story...

Verse 6 probes further, "When (Jesus) was already not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to Him, saying to Him, 'Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that

You should enter under my roof... I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed."

The Roman Centurion's attitude was the opposite of what the Jews portrayed. Rather than expect Jesus to heal his servant because the Centurion deserved a blessing, the Centurion believed Jesus would heal the Roman's servant despite the fact he didn't deserve it.

I look at my life, and how good God's been, and I too can say, it's more *in spite of me* than *because of me*.

This is the case for us all. **Whenever God blesses us it's always the result of His grace not our goodness.**

Jabez believed in grace and asked God, ***"would You bless me indeed."*** **Did you know you could do that?**

You can actually ask God to bless *you!*

It sounds so elementary, but I'm not sure some of us get it. I run into believers all the time who seem afraid to ask God for a blessing. They're afraid that doing so is a selfish act. They'll ask God to bless their brother and mother - their sister and cousin - the mailman, the clerk, even their football team... everybody but them!

I'm sure Jabez prayed for others, but first he prayed, **"God bless me!"** *And did God think he was being selfish?* Apparently not! Notice, in our text God refers to Jabez, as ***"more honorable than his brothers."***

We forget God is a loving Father who wants to bless His kids... My children knew that I was *the easy touch*.

When it came to ice cream after dinner, or pushing back bedtime you went to dad, not mom. Mom was a door with a deadbolt. Dad was a door on greasy hinges... *I could be easily swung. I could be moved.*

And I believe this is the case with our Father God. He's a lot "*softer touch*" than we think! He loves us. Our earnest prayers *melt his heart and move his hand.*

Find a person or a church that's been blessed by God, and they have one commonality - ***they asked!***

I like the first word and last word of Jabez' request.

The first word, "*O-O-O-O-h.*" *He groans for grace.* He's desperate. He doesn't want to live without God's blessing... And the last word, "*indeed.*" It's an emphasis. He's saying, "*When you bless me, lay it on thick - with more than I can handle. Bless me indeed!*"

Remember James 4:2, "*you do not have because you do not ask.*" *When was the last time you came right out and asked God to bless you?* Jabez did and God called him *more honorable than his brothers!*

God knows we can't bless others if we have nothing to give them. "*A dry well quenches nobody's thirst.*" God wants to bless you; then make you a blessing!

Notice Jabez' second request, "*enlarge my territory*" or "*expand my borders.*" Jabez is referring to his land holdings, but there were further implications. More land may not have been the ultimate point of his prayer.

In antiquity the more property a man possessed the larger was his sphere of influence - the more respected was his opinion - the more authority he carried.

I believe this is what Jabez was ultimately after... not more *sand*, but more *sway* - not more *ground*, but *broader effect* - not more *mud*, but greater *ministry*.

Jabez wanted to influence his world for God, and he wanted more of the world to influence. In essence, Jabez wanted to broaden the *reach'n of his preach'n*.

This was our prayer when we moved our church from Stone Mountain. Our old location was on a back street. No one knew we existed. We had no exposure.

When we bought this property, McDaniels Bridge Rd. didn't connect with Hewatt and the red light on 78. All the Killian Hill traffic was routed around us. *We were just happy that cars would be driving down Killian Hill, and people might spot our building at a distance.*

But unbeknownst to us, at the time of our purchase, Gwinnett county was planning to turn McDaniels Bridge Road into a cut-through from 78 to Killian Hill. Construction started a few months after we relocated.

Today all northbound traffic flows right by our door. God heard our prayer and *enlarged our territory*.

But God enlarges us in a multitude of ways.

We all have gifts, and a ministry in which to employ those gifts. Everyone of us has a two-fold ministry... *as a servant in this church, and as a witness to the world.*

Are you praying that God will broaden your borders, expand your influence, enlarge the scope of your service? Are you asking Him to open up new opportunities and bring new people across your path?

Many years ago, a church member asked, *“Sandy, how does it feel now that our church has arrived?”*

I suppose he meant it as a compliment. I’m sure he was remembering leaner times... but I got upset!

“Arrived” did you say? You’re not seeing what I’m seeing. We’ve got empty seats. There’re people in our community who don’t know Jesus. We don’t “arrive” until we get to heaven. Until then, we’re on mission.

Let’s not mimic the disciples who saw the glory of Jesus on the mountain top, and wanted to pitch tents. *“We’re called to move mountains, not sit on mountain tops.” I hope you’re praying for a mountain to move?*

Jabez looked out his front door and saw plenty of unclaimed territory beyond his borders - *so he asked God to give it to him!* He prayed, *“enlarge my territory.”*

I don't know if you've looked out our front door lately, but there's plenty of unclaimed territory for Jesus.

This New Year, it’s time we asked God as individual Christians and as a church to *“enlarge our territory.”*

And notice Jabez' third request: *“that Your hand would be with me.”* Throughout the Scriptures **the hand of God** refers to His strength and His power...

1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time."

Acts 11:21 says of the early church, "The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord." How we need God's hand on our lives and church! Jabez prayed for the Lord to rest His hand on his life - bring a supernatural empowerment.

This past fall when the hurricane hit, I injured my elbow from picking up downed branches in my yard.

The doctor diagnosed me with tennis elbow. It only hurts when I shake hands - *not what you want if you're a pastor...* The cure is to stop using my right hand. *You may've noticed my pathetic lefty handshakes.*

It's sad, I'm not that strong to start with, but I'm a noticeably weaker person without my right hand. *I need my hand back!* But even more so, **I need God's hand!**

Without God's power on us we're all shaking lefty.

I hate to say it, but *all too commonly Christians are far too common.* There's nothing different about us, nothing exciting. There's no trace of the supernatural.

Oh, that people would say of you and me, what the Pharaoh of Egypt said of Joseph, "Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?"

All too often Christians live an *unplugged piety, a mundane morality.* There's no evidence of God's hand.

In Concord, New Hampshire there's a street sign that reads "Electric Avenue." But underneath it is another sign, "No Outlet." Wow, **no outlet on Electric Avenue!**

I hope that's not true of you spiritually. If you're in Christ you live on Electric Avenue. The main breaker is on. God's Spirit lives inside us. But we need to plug in!

We need faith to move in the power of the Spirit.

It reminds me of the pastor who was working with a death row inmate. When the man's date with the electric chair arrived, the pastor didn't know what to say. He stumbled to find the right words... "Good-bye," wasn't enough... "See you later," sounded trite. So the pastor just blurted out the first thing that popped into his head. Shaking hands, he said, "more power to ya!"

But that's what Jabez prays! He asks God for more power! He asks God *for a hand!* Too many of us see God's hand only when its time for a *spiritual spanking*, rather than when its time for a *spiritual insurgence*.

Some churches operate in such a manner that if God were to remove His hand, the work would continue as if nothing happened. If we're going to ask God to enlarge our borders we also need to ask Him to place His hand on us - to guide us - to empower us. Jabez asked for **God's favor**, now he asks for **God's power**.

Let me suggest, the reason we're so **unaccustomed** to God's hand upon our lives is because we're too busy trusting in our own hands. We want to do it ourselves.

We're all do-it-yourselfers. Beware of pride!

One Sabbath in the synagogue Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. And in a spiritual sense all of us have withered hands - *we're all shaking lefty.*

We need God's hand upon us if we're going to serve Him effectively, and accomplish His purposes. This is why Jabez prayed, *“that Your hand would be with me.”*

And finally he prays, *“that you would keep me from evil.”* Notice Jabez doesn't pray, *“Lord, keep evil from me.”* God promises to protect us from the evil one.

We learn from the story of Job, Satan can't harm a hair on our head, without first getting God's permission.

Christians have a *Father-filter* - which means, when evil does come to me it arrives with a divine purpose. And attached to it is the grace needed to overcome it!

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians (10:13), *“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”* Evil attacking me is not my greatest threat.

The greatest danger we face isn't **evil attacking us**, but **evil attaching to us**. Jabez doesn't pray, *“Lord, keep evil from me, but keep me from evil.”* Our most lethal enemy isn't *the evil without*, but *the evil within*.

It's my flesh, my warped perspectives, the tastes I've cultivated for carnal things, my preoccupation with the temporal and tangible - this is my greatest struggle.

Jesus said "the gates of hell will not prevail against My church" - but churches crumble everyday from the *sin* that's *within*... Here's one of my favorite prayers...

"Dear Lord, so far today God, I've done all right. I haven't lost my temper, been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or over-indulgent. I'm thankful for that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help. Amen."

Without question, our greatest threat as servants of God is not *Satan*, but *self*. Our constant prayer needs to be, "protect me from myself!" or "keep me from evil."

And did you know you can pray such a prayer?

You can solicit God's help in your battle against sin!

God isn't just sitting at the judgment seat watching you struggle - waiting to pound the gavel and issue the verdict. Jesus is our advocate. He's in the trenches with us, obtaining for us the power we need for victory.

Last year I helped coach my grandsons in T-Ball, and I forgot a rule that's unique to 5 year old baseball. Each team gets a coach in the field. He's there to help the kids make right choices in the heat of the moment.

I think we forget that we also have a coach in the field. God isn't confined to the dugout. His Spirit is next to us. He's not going to make the play for us, but if we involve Him He'll certainly help us make right choices.

Jude 24 states, "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy..." God is able and willing to

keep us from stumbling! This is why Jabez prayed, *“that You would keep me from evil.”*

And remember the outcome of Jabez’ four requests. Verse 10, *“God granted him what he requested.”*

Let’s wrap it up, *“Do you want to be more honorable than your brothers? Do you want to be someone’s pain, or someone’s gain - a blessing or a blight?”*

Jabez lived to contradict his name! He was once labeled a *pain*, but because of the prayer he prayed, he ended up bringing *great joy* to people around him.

And this is the prayer we can pray this week - both for ourselves and for our church - **the Jabez prayer!**

Perhaps you also have been living under a cloud.

Nobody thought you'd accomplish much, or that your life would count. For years you've succumbed to your handicap, but today you realize its time for a change.

You want to stop *succumbing* and start *overcoming!*

What a way to begin a New Year! Let’s pray like Jabez... *“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!...”* I believe God will grant us our request!