

BEFORE **THE PRAYER** **OF JABEZ**

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Before The Prayer of Jabez
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Preface

No book in recent history has attracted more attention on Christian bookshelves than *The Prayer of Jabez*. It is written in a very readable style with some excellent, down-home illustrations, and by a well-respected, conservative author, *The Prayer* reached the number one slot on some best-seller lists. As the title implies, it is a book about prayer. Yet, it is more. It is an encouragement to pray. Christians and many non-Christians agree on the importance of prayer, and that we all should pray more than we do. *The Prayer of Jabez* impels us to that vital communication.

Although I have read the Bible through numerous times, my first memorable introduction to the person of Jabez came by way of a chapel message in the 1980s at Northeastern Bible College in Essex Fells, New Jersey. The Reverend David M. Virkler, a governor of the school, exalted Jabez as a role model. Interesting, too, is the fact that *The Prayer of Jabez's* author, Dr. Bruce Wilkerson, was an earlier graduate of that same school.

Like other readers, I am intrigued by *The Prayer of Jabez*. At the same time, the book gives rise to some salient questions—questions about prayer that must not be overlooked. If the author's target group is that of true believers in Jesus Christ, some of the questions become inherently self-answering. If, however, the intention is to reach unsaved people, some serious theological questions remain unanswered.

It is the intention of this book to respond to what *this* author believes to be unanswered questions relative to both Christian and non-Christian readers. There is no intention here to discredit in any way either the author or the book, *The Prayer of Jabez*. Rather, the intention is to look beyond prayer itself in the effort to determine *what prayer is*, *who can pray*, and *the mechanics of how prayer works*, initially, to the benefit of man and, ultimately, to the glory of God.

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What The Scriptures Teach About Jabez

Jabez is mentioned only four times in the Bible, and all four references are from First Chronicles in the Old Testament. The initial reference is sited in chapter 2, verse 55.

And the families of scribes who lived at Jabez were the Tirathites, the Shimeathites, and the Sucathites. Those are the Kenites who came from Hammath, the father of the house of Rechab.

Here Jabez is obviously a physical place, a city in Judah. The precise location of Old Testament Jabez is today a matter of conjecture. More important than its location, however, is the fact that families of scribes lived there, implying that there was considerable interest in the Law of Moses. There are various views regarding the functions of the three Kenite families, who are named in this verse. Jerome¹ believed those three families functioned as singers, scribes, and recorders. Keil believed they were descendents of three men: Tira, Shemei, and Suchah.² Whatever their functions, the passage itself is clear regarding their origin. They were apparently Godly men and women, who loved the LORD and sought to walk carefully in His ways.

The second reference to Jabez comes from First Chronicles, chapter 4, verse 9:

And Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother named him Jabez saying, "Because I bore him with pain."

This time the reference is to a male person, Jabez. He is mentioned twice. The first mention in verse nine is obviously to identify him quite specifically, while simultaneously setting him apart from “his brothers.” The second mention of Jabez in this verse indicates that his mother named him, and in particular, because she “bore him with pain.”

¹A Biblical scholar of the 4TH century, who translated the Bible into Latin.

²See the article “Tirathites” in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE).

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Proper names were very important in the days of the Old Testament. Some are actually prophetic of the person's character. Who could fail to note the change of Abram to Abraham,³ or Jacob to Israel⁴? So, the LORD's name, *YHWH*,⁵ and other various designations of deity, denotes His character.

What is peculiar about the name of Jabez is that whatever meaning it originally had, that meaning has now been lost to us. Some have allowed that Jabez means "pain," in that his mother "bore him with pain."

¹*High Father to Father of a Multitude* (Gen 17:5)

²*Supplanter to Prince with God* (Gen 32:28)

³YHWH was the LORD's covenant name with His people, Israel. The Hebrews considered it too sacred to pronounce aloud.

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The head of a family of Judah, noted for his "honorable" character, though "his mother bare him with sorrow" (1 Ch 4:9,10), *ya`bets* being interpreted as if it stood for *ya`tsebh*, "he causes pain."⁶

But the phrase, "as if it stood for *ya`tsebh*," is an honest commentary caution, indicating that the author is unsure of the origin and meaning of the name Jabez.⁷

What may be more meaningful is the fact that the Jews believed Jabez to be an eminent Doctor of the Law –one whose skill and fame gathered about him numerous scholars, and for which the City of Jabez was likely named. If true, this lies in sharp contrast with some commentators, who believe the prayer is likely to be from one who sets forth on his own, as he commences life's venture into the world. The Jewish concept seems more plausible.

First Chronicles, chapter 4, verse 9 also indicates something of Jabez's status:

And Jabez was more honorable than his brothers...

While the Hebrew word translated *honorable* has several meanings,⁸ the thought of prominence with God and man should likely be assumed.⁹ "His brothers" may refer to natural, physical brothers, born of Jabez's parents, or simply his countrymen.

...and his mother named him Jabez saying, "Because I bore him with pain" (I Chr 4:9b).

⁶ISBE, *op.cit.*

⁷Gesenius' *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* offers no hint at the origin of *Jabez*.

⁸**dB'k.n**, heavy, great, vehement, plentiful, troublesome, burdensome, *et. al.* See Gesenius *in locus*.

⁹Such is the meaning of **dB'k.n** in the Niphal.

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It had long been the LORD's decree that all women would bear children in pain.¹⁰ Something nevertheless, prompted Jabez's mother to speak of her pain in the birth Jabez as being intensified.

The Hebrew word here may also mean *sorrow*, in which case Jabez's mother would be speaking of her intense sorrow.

Whether she is speaking of physical pain or sorrow connected with Jabez's birth, or an emotional or spiritual pain or sorrow, we cannot know. In any event, Jabez name is inextricably bound up with what she believed or experienced at that time.

However few they are in number, all of these notations serve as background for the pinnacle event: Jabez's prayer.

Now Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that Thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my border, and that Thy hand might be with me, and that Thou wouldst keep me from harm, that it may not pain me!" And God granted him what he requested (I Chr 4:10).

All of us like to read stories with good endings. What we have here is nothing short of a blessed account in which the LORD grants the request of His petitioner. The concern of this writing, however, is not so much what Jabez asked and received as what Jabez had *to be* to ask and receive it.

We live, unfortunately, in a day of "name-it-and-claim-it" theology. While *The Prayer of Jabez* never overtly advocates that, I write with the fear that readers of that book may nevertheless adopt the formula of Jabez's prayer without adopting the formula of Jabez's life. There is a fundamental maxim that we have to *be* something before we can *do* something. Especially is this true in the spiritual realm. But, how do we mortals enter that realm?

¹⁰Genesis 3:16

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What Is Prayer?

When I am leading someone to receive Christ as LORD and Savior of his life, I always start by using Romans 6:23,

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

After explaining that “wages” is something we are given for work we have performed, while “gift” is that which God gives freely of Himself, I ultimately move to Romans 10:13,

Whoever will call upon the name of the LORD will be saved.

At this juncture, I always ask the one to whom I’m witnessing, “What does it mean to you to ‘call upon the Name of the LORD’?” Having asked this of a young girl, she looked me straight-in-the-eye and said, “It means to pray.” She was right.

But, what does it mean *to pray*? Simply stated, prayer is talking with God. Over the years, I’ve had many people say to me, “I don’t know how,” or “I don’t know what to say.” My response has always been, “Just tell Him you’re sorry for being a sinner and ask Him to forgive your sin –to save you.” The difficulty in praying is, in many cases, not so much knowing *how* or *what* to say as it is being embarrassed before God for our sin. And well we should be. Still, the LORD is not one of whom we should be afraid; rather, He is the One who loves us with an undying love –a true love that never weakens or wears out. With that in mind, no one ought to be afraid to come to the LORD in prayer.

Experience has taught me that, although a person receives Christ in this simple way, he often fails to realize the fulness of what has occurred until he prays and says, “Thank You” to God. Since I learned this, I have sought to lead the newly-born again Christian to recognize the LORD’s salvation as a gift and pray saying, “Thank You, LORD, for saving me..”

Fundamentals of Prayer

There are several fundamentals we need to understand about prayer. First, all prayer that reaches the Father, reaches Him through Jesus Christ. And the Holy Spirit has already initiated all prayer that reaches the Father through Christ. The only prayer a lost person can pray to the Father that the Father hears and

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answers is the prayer: “God be merciful to me a sinner,” or a meaning to that effect. The prayer must come from a sincere and repentant heart.

When a lost person offers a prayer confessing sin, believing upon Jesus as the Father’s Sacrifice for one’s own sin, the LORD saves that person by affecting the covering of his sin by the blood of Jesus Christ. Immediately, with the life cleansed of its sin, the Holy Spirit enters and takes up residency in the individual.

Who Can Pray?

From that instant onward, the Holy Spirit is the Person who *burdens* the believer to pray. A believer’s burden is the Holy Spirit’s call to prayer. A believer, who is living outside the realm of the Father’s perfect will, hinders the divine power of the Spirit in the initiation of prayer and all else that is spiritually and righteously potential in the individual’s life.

Therefore, for Jabez or you or me - for anyone! - true prayer is the outgrowth of a righteous life before the Father. Christian prayer is not a *mantra* that is repeated over and over and over again with the hope that what is requested will be given. In fact, Jesus seriously warned against “vain repetitions.”¹¹ Prayer may be –ought to be– persistent. The Father wants to know that we’re serious about the things we bring before Him. But, being persistent in praying is quite different from empty and meaningless phrases that become mindlessly, continuously repeated.

Examine the multiple prayers in the Bible –prayers of Abraham, Issac, Joseph, Elijah, David, Solomon, Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, to name but a few. All of these men, while inherently sinful from Adam, were supported by righteous lives that led to their prayers being answered.

The Psalmist saw a connection between the incense on the Altar of Incense in the Tabernacle’s Holy Place and the prayers of those who loved and served the LORD. David wrote:

May my prayer be counted as incense before Thee; The lifting up of my hands as the evening offering (Psalm 141:2).

Another of the more interesting facets of prayer comes to us from the Book of Revelation. It is there that we learn from the Apostle John, who was caught up into Heaven, that true prayers are never lost to God.

*And when He had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and **golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints*** (Revelation 5:8,

¹¹Mathew 6:7

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emphasis mine).

Indeed, the LORD hears all of the prayers of the righteous. Being initiated by the Holy Spirit, the Father answers with “Yes” or “Wait.” All “prayers” that lack the Holy Spirit’s impetus or initiation, the Father does not hear with the intent to respond. Such prayer results in a, “No,” from our perspective.

Many Biblical personalities received no divine response to their prayers. Careful examination reveals that where no response resulted, the character of the inquirer was out of step with the will of God, his Creator.

One of the most notable instances occurs in the life of King Saul. Saul’s life had slipped to a less-than-righteous level when in vain he sought the LORD.

When Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD did not answer him, either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets
(I Samuel 28:6).

In similar fashion, the LORD Jesus refused to respond to Pontius Pilate when asked to respond to the accusations against Him.

And He did not answer him with regard to even a single charge, so that the governor was quite amazed
(Matthew 27:14).

Again, when standing before Herod, Jesus refused to reply.

And he questioned Him at some length; but He answered him nothing (Luke 23:9).

Reason, based upon these few passages alone, would demand that we believe Jabez to have been a righteous man in the eyes of the Heavenly Father; otherwise, what he prayerfully requested would have been forthrightly denied.

May we not, therefore, also conclude that it is not the *wording* of one’s prayer that arrests the attention of God, but rather the rightness of one’s life, giving vent to the indwelling Holy Spirit’s request that produces answered prayer?

Nor is it the *physical position* we assume that arrests the attention of the Father. Some persons are of the opinion we must be kneeling, while others believe we should bow our heads or fold our hands. All are respectful, and true prayer must be offered respectfully. Still, a study of the prayer lives of Biblical personalities, who lived righteously before God, reveals that there is no single, physical position assumed before God that affects a Divine response to prayer.

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“...for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart”
(I Samuel 16:7).

Let the reader be here reminded –and in no uncertain terms– that it is the righteous life of the born-again believer that alone knows the indwelling of Holy Spirit. Further, all true prayer originates with the Spirit and is addressed to the Father through the agency of the Son, Jesus Christ.

How Prayer Works

If the above be true –*and it is!*-- then how can the Heavenly Father, whose desire it is “to give what is good to those who ask Him” refuse to give what the Holy Spirit asks? Simply put, He cannot. Disharmony cannot exist within the Godhead. It is theologically impossible.

This is what the Apostle John meant when he cites Jesus’ argument,

“If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7).

Had Jesus simply said, “Ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you,” some credence could be given to the “name-it-and-claim-it” theology. But Jesus prefaces man’s receiving upon two factors: First, man must be *abiding* in Christ. That is, man must settle down and make his home in the LORD and within His will. He must be a righteous person, having been born again in Christ; and he must live in the Word so that the Word – the Scripture– lives in him!

For several years I ministered as an itinerant evangelist. In the smaller church meetings, I often stayed in the homes of church members. It was there that I discovered the true meaning of *abiding*. In some homes, I was told, “We want you to be ‘at home,’ just as if it were your own.” That sounded reassuring until I heard the rest: “The only thing... please do not set any soda pop bottles on the coffee table. It’s an antique that belonged to my great-grandmother, and...” - well, you get the idea. Before the index of things I was *not* to do was completed, I felt very much *not-at-home*.

On the other hand, there were hosts who said, “Look, we keep a busy schedule. We’ll have some meals here, and they will be on time. But, if you get hungry, you know where the refrigerator is. Help yourself. If you don’t, you’ll have only yourself to blame. The house is yours. We’ll see you at 5:00 P.M.” Wow! In those homes I relaxed and I *abode*.

The “if” in Jesus’ word is conditional¹²; that is, *maybe one will abide in Him, maybe he won’t*. But, if he does abide in Christ, and the Holy Spirit is allowed to guide and mold his life into Christlikeness, he can count

¹²Greek has four classifications of condition that may be affixed to a sentence. Here we have the third classification: “If you do...(maybe you will, maybe you won’t)...”

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on receiving whatever he wishes because **what the Spirit wishes for him will be what one wishes for himself.**

The Mechanics of Prayer

Years ago, when I was just commencing my ministry in a country area, I recall Sunday School classes I attended that were being taught by obviously unprepared teachers. After reading the lesson around-and-aloud in a verse-by-person method, the teacher would re-read the first verse and ask a member of the class, “Now, what does that verse mean to you?” You can only imagine how often we received a variety of responses to the meaning of a single verse. Quite frequently, when a verse seemed to defy interpretation, the class member would respond to the teacher’s directive by saying, “I believe that verse is self-explanatory.”

While I was engaged in overseas evangelism, a New Zealand pastor remarked that the adult Sunday School class in his church was the strangest he had ever encountered. Believing that I had already encountered the strangest in my earlier ministry, I inquired as to exactly what he meant. “They *vote* on the meaning of the Scriptures!” he exclaimed. “Whenever a difficult passage arises, and someone offers an explanation not previously agreed upon, someone reminds them that ‘we had this lesson four years ago, and we voted then that it meant...’” Notwithstanding their “votes,” I continue to believe there is a better way.

Hermeneutics is the art and science of Biblical Interpretation; and my study has led me to believe that prayer possesses a divine design just as man possesses a divine imprint.¹³

One salient principle in hermeneutics is that there is but **one interpretation**; there are **many applications**. It is to an application that we now turn for our understanding of the mechanics of prayer.

Jesus had just witnessed Simon Peter’s testimony. In a portion of His reply, Jesus said,

“I shall give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatever you might bind on Earth shall have been bound in Heaven, and whatever you might loose on Earth shall have been loosed in Heaven” (Matthew 16:19, Gk tr.)

In His reply, Jesus revealed more than what is contained on the face of the statement. I have quoted it literally from the Greek New Testament in order that you might see the tenses of the verbs. Note carefully that the NASB translates the verse with

*...whatever you shall bind on Earth **shall be bound** (future tense) in Heaven...*

but the translation of the Greek text is,

*...whatever you might bind on Earth **shall have been bound** (future perfect tense) in Heaven...*

¹³Man is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

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The English future tense simply projects the action of the verb into the future. The Greek perfect tense indicates an action that is complete, but has continuing results that reach into the future.¹⁴ The word “might” also appears in our translation to indicate the Greek subjunctive mood of the verb “bind.” The subjunctive mood indicates *potentiality*. That is, Peter *might* bind something, or he *might* not. But he is able.

Here now is the crux of the situation: While Peter’s action has *potential*, it has yet to occur. But, when his binding occurs, it will have *already* occurred in Heaven. And what has been bound in Heaven will remain bound unto all forth-coming generations.

This clearly gives us understanding that what we see happen on Earth –those events have already occurred in Heaven. It is as if we were seeing it on Earth as a mirrored replay.

It is vitally important, however, to remember that there is no answer to prayer without the occurrence of prayer. We cannot, therefore, simply acquiesce in the hope that everything will work out satisfactorily. We must understand the urging of the Holy Spirit within us to exercise prayer and engage in praying.

The word *prayer* occurs more than 200 times in the Bible. It occupied a place of supreme importance in the lives of the patriarchs and the prophets, and was fundamental to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the lives of His apostles. Such occupancy of importance –especially in the life of Christ— thus constitutes it as vital to the maintenance of our spiritual lives.

Of the multiple passages addressing the subject, none have so gripped my heart and life as that of John 15:7,

If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

It seems strangely appropriate that our Lord would address this subject with His disciples during an era that was increasingly hostile toward Him and His message. Surely, that is His word for believers today: *in the midst of trial and tragedy, resort swiftly to prayer.*

And we do that; yet, our problem lies in the failure to understand that it's not sufficient to go merely through the motions of prayer, however intense the hurt; rather, His teaching requires that our *lives* be in spiritual order *before* we pray. In all truth, His teaching clearly is that unless our lives know a perennial fellowship with Him, we cannot *pray*, the utterance of words notwithstanding.

The most important word in any sentence is the verb because the verb denotes the action of the subject. The key word that unlocks the meaning of John 15:7 is verb *abide*. An aorist, active, subjunctive, second person

¹⁴“Note the future perfect indicative (estai dedemenon(estai lelumenon), a state of completion” (Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, in locus*).

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plural, it renders *μεινῆτε* (*abiding*) potentially available to all believers. *"If you all are continuing to remain and make your home in Me..."*

Abiding is not available for a privileged few; it is available for all, who are privileged to be *in Christ*. The subjunctive mood of the verb indicates that it is *possible* for every believer to be all that Christ intends him to be. Additionally, He has given us the Scriptures to this very end (cf. II Timothy 3:16-17).

Without question, *in Me* (ἐν ἐμοί) constitutes the precise place of our abiding. Edersheim highlights the spiritual significance of Christ to us when he notes that Jesus' question regarding His true identity, as recorded in Matthew 16, was issued to the disciples outside the area of the Promised Land, as had been settled by the Hebrew tribes. There, away from the Holy City, away from the temple, the priesthood, the Scriptures, Jesus asked them plainly, "Who am I to you?"

A modern context further clarifies the meaning: Away from the home church, away from the pastor, the Sunday School teacher, the literature, the hymnbooks –cut off even from the Bible— *who is Jesus Christ to you?* While I am studiously unmoved from my pre-tribulation, pre-millennial position on eschatology, should the Church be required to encounter severe persecution prior to the Rapture, we may have opportunity to test the significance of who Jesus Christ is to us and whether we are truly abiding in Him!

Some Technical Aspects

The Greeks were far more explicit with language than we. They had *four* possible responses to their “if” questions. The “ifs” introduce what are called “conditional sentences.” The first-class is *if, and it is so*; the second-class is, *if, but it is not so*; the third-class reads, *if, maybe it is and maybe it's not*; and the fourth-class, *if, and I wish it were so, but it is not*. Differentiating these “ifs,” is accomplished from within the language; yet in this verse each *if* reveals a third-class conditional sentence: *If you abide in Me (maybe you will, maybe you won't)...* *If My words abide in you (maybe they will, maybe they won't)*.

The second significant verb, *ask* (αἰτησάσθε), is a Greek aorist, middle, imperative. The aorist tense denotes action occurring in a point of time, decisively and with finality. The middle voice here carries the idea of personal involvement. And the imperative mood connotes a command. Thus, His Holy Spirit commandingly initiates prayer through those who are consistently living in the Lord.

What remains to be said in the verse is logically axiomatic. Still, we must never allow that truth will be automatically understood. Jesus is saying that when we abide in Him, we are in the right position for the Holy Spirit to use us as a corridor through which He communicates with the Father. Now, how is it possible for the Holy Spirit to request from the Father something that the Father's cannot allow? Or, how can the Father reply

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negatively to what the Spirit Himself asks? The answer to both questions is the same: *He cannot!* To allow either would be to place the unity of the Godhead in jeopardy. Such is a theological and practical impossibility (II Timothy 2:13).

The key to answered prayer, therefore, is for us to abide in Christ, moment-by-moment, that we might be useful to the Spirit when He desires to address the Father through the medium of our mortal spirits. It's not the words we use, not the physical position we assume, not even how much time we take; it's whether we are living daily in a moment-to-moment yieldedness to Christ. I cannot help but wonder whether Wesley knew this when he said, "God does nothing but in answer to prayer."

3

What Is Righteousness?

The word *righteousness* is mentioned more than 300 times in the Bible. The first instance occurs in Genesis 15:6, where it is said,

Then he (Abram) believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

The Hebrew word for righteousness¹⁵ means *rightness, justness, lawfulness*. The “root basically connotes conformity to an ethical or moral standard.”¹⁶

One scholar states that the original significance of the Hebrew root, *sdq*, means “to be straight.”¹⁷ This is certainly in line with the character of Almighty God. It is upon Abram’s belief in Him that righteousness was bestowed. It is, therefore, reasonable that He should desire all of His children (all believers in Jesus Christ) to be just like Him, and for those who are to be declared “righteous.”

Another writer views righteousness from an ethical standpoint, saying,

Righteousness is the quality of relationships between individuals.¹⁸

The Bible says,

The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much (James 5:16c).

This is precisely what made the prayer of Jabez effective.

And Jabez was more honorable than his brothers... (I Chr 4:9).

It was not that Jabez was all that he might have become; he was simply *more righteous* than his brothers.

Still, what constitutes righteousness? How does the LORD measure righteousness in each of us?

¹⁵hq'd'e (*tsedaqah*)

¹⁶*TWOT*, Vol. II, p. 752.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, citing N. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the OT*. Schocken, 1964, p. 73.

¹⁸Achtemeier, *The Gospel of Righteousness*, pp. 68-70; quoted in *TWOT*, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 754..

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One of the earliest tests is Scripture concern the brothers, Cain and Abel.¹⁹ Each brother was given Divine direction regarding the nature of the sacrifice he was to bring to the LORD.²⁰

Three specifics come to light in this test of the two brothers: first, their activity; second, their attitude; and third, their motive.

Abel was a keeper of flocks, a shepherd; Cain was a tiller of the ground, a farmer. Although both men knew what God had directed them to bring as an offering, Cain ignored the Divine directive and brought the fruit of the work of his own hands. Abel, on the other hand, obeyed the LORD's directive and "brought of the firstlings of his flock, and of their fat portions."²¹

Upon inspection, the LORD accepted Abel's offering and rejected Cain's.

And the LORD had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard (Genesis 4:4b-5a).

Notice carefully that the LORD's acceptance was of Abel *and his offering* –not the offering alone. Likewise, His rejection of Cain was of *both* the offering bearer and the offering he bore. What is involved here? Simply this: Abel brought the sacrifice the LORD had ordered. In doing this, he demonstrated a rightness in his activity. Cain, by refusing to bring the correct sacrifice, demonstrated a wrongness. The proper activity is very important. It demonstrates both obedience and subservience toward God.

Examples of Righteousness

Righteousness was the Psalmist's cry.

O LORD, lead me in Thy righteousness because of my foes; Make Thy way straight before me (Psalm 5:8).

Long before his anointing as King of Israel, David gave sound advice to the king when he said,

...the LORD will repay each man for his righteousness and his faithfulness (I Samuel 26:23a).

¹⁹Genesis 4:1-10

²⁰This is in evidence through what the LORD said in Genesis 4:7, where He reminded Cain "If you do well..." How was Cain to "do well," except that he had previously be so instructed?

²¹How would Abel have known to bring the "fat portions," except that the LORD had so instructed him?

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Righteousness²² embraces honesty, justice, and righteous acts that prove to be wholly true in the lives of those who followed the LORD. Furthermore, Solomon said, “And the desire of the righteous will be granted” (Proverbs 10:24).

Hebrews 11, in the New Testament, offers us a close look at several, Old Testament personalities whose lives exemplify the righteousness that is required by the LORD for us all. A careful examination of these lives reveals the righteousness that characterized Jabez’s life and enabled his prayer to become effective.

1. Abel (Hebrews 11:4)

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.

While the etymology of his name is uncertain,²³ obedience in faith is the key to Abel’s characterization as “righteous.” Obviously, the LORD had carefully and properly instructed both Abel and his brother, Cain, regarding *what* and *how* they were to approach Him through sacrifice. Proof of Divine preparation lies in the fact that faith is man’s willful response to God’s revelation. In other words, God *reveals* to man what He is going to do, and man *responds* in accordance with what God reveals. The LORD’s consistency in this pattern throughout the Scriptures is additional support to the proposition that faith is obedience to His revealed will.

Solomon said, “A *good* name is to be more desired than great riches...” (Proverbs 22:1a). Abel gained that “good name” from the LORD Himself. Who else could have declared Abel “righteous” except the LORD? And that righteous declaration was the result of having lived the life of faith.

2. Enoch (Hebrews 11:5)

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God.

Genesis 5:21-24 gives us all the Old Testament has to say about Enoch.²⁴ Because he lived a life of faith toward God, the LORD raptured him into Heaven without his going through the veil of death.

“Pleasing” is the designation given to Enoch. It is significant that the word may also be translated as “acceptable.” One must be righteous to be acceptable to God. When we are deemed righteous by Him, we become effective for Him in many ways. This again explains the fortitude of Jabez’s prayer.

²²hq'd'c. (*tsedaqah*)

²³Gesenius suggests that it may be related to the shortness of his life (p. 214b).

²⁴Enoch, the son of Cain, is mentioned in Genesis 4:17-18. This is a different Enoch than the one we have in view here. The Lamech of Genesis 4 is also different from the Lamech of Genesis 5:30. This latter Lamech is the father of Noah.

Before The Prayer of Jabez

The concept of “walking” with God carries the idea of fellowship. Enoch fellowshiped with God! *Think of that!* The Master Designer of the Universe—a universe man has yet to fathom—allowed a mere mortal, Enoch, to fellowship with Him. In my brief lifetime, I have had the opportunity to be in the presence of and fellowship with some notable personalities. But, the fellowship of Enoch with the LORD excels us all!

Can anyone dare to believe that Enoch and God did not agree—this Pure and Holy God and this sinful, mortal man? And that agreement is the element of faith.

3. Noah (Hebrews 11:7)

By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Although each of these personalities offers us a lesson in faithful living, none is clearer for our understanding of faith than that of Noah. The warning the LORD gave him was His *revelation*. No one knows what God has in mind until He reveals it. We are not told all that God revealed to Noah; we only know that it was “about things not yet seen.”

Yet, Noah *responded* to what he had heard from the LORD: “In reverence (he) prepared an ark.” Out of his respect for God, Noah certified his belief in what God had told him was coming upon the Earth. A lot of us *talk* about our faith. Noah *demonstrated* his!

4. Abraham (Hebrews 11:8-10)

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

It is not possible to include here even a small portion of all that is known about Abraham. To attempt it would be to dwarf our thesis in this small volume. It is sufficient for us to know that Abraham was previously known as Abram;²⁵ that his earliest life was lived in Ur,²⁶ where worship of the sun goddess occurred; and that he is known to Jews and Gentiles alike as the father of the faithful.

²⁵ *High father*. His name was later changed to Abraham, *father of the multitudes*.

²⁶ “The most generally-accepted theory at the present time is that Ur is to be identified with the modern Mugheir (or Mughayyar, “the pitchy”) in Southern Babylonia” (ISBE, *in locus*).

Before The Prayer of Jabez

It was Abraham, who by faith was granted a son when both he and his wife, Sarah, were past the reproductive stage of life. It was Abraham, who faithfully brought his only son, Isaac, to the point of human sacrifice. Above all, it was Abraham, whose faith in the LORD led him to believe that were he to obey the LORD in the taking of Isaac's life, the LORD Himself would raise Isaac from the dead. After all, were he himself and Sarah not "dead" reproductively when Isaac was physically born to them? That being so, the LORD would certainly raise Isaac from the dead, for Isaac had been divinely selected as Abraham's son of promise and as Abraham's progeny for all successive generations. What a colossal personality Abraham was! How greatly he challenges us to believe God!

5. Sarah (Hebrews 11:11-12)

By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

Sarah's inclusion in the early personalities of Hebrews 11 serves as a clear signal of how the LORD's view of human life differs considerably from our own.

The Genesis reading of Sarah's attitude doesn't leave us with the thought that she was at all faithful. Having lived in the disgrace of childlessness almost her whole life, she laughed when she heard she was to bear a son! *She was too old! This was just impossible.* Fearful of the consequences of her sin of disbelief, she lied when she was confronted about having laughed. In fact, it had been Sarah's idea for Abraham to take Hagar as "a second womb" in the hope of aiding the LORD in the fulfillment of His own promise. Talk about *a lack of faith!* Her insistence of this unprescribed union flew directly in the Face of Almighty God! Did she not believe He could fulfill His own promises? Indeed, she did not. Therein lies her gravest sin.

Yet, the LORD views Sarah as faithful and inspires the Apostle Paul to include her as such in his Letter to the Hebrews.

As strangely as this resonates in our current culture, the LORD led the Apostle Peter to commend Abraham's obstreperous nephew as "righteous Lot" in his Second Letter to the Jewish believers of New Testament times.²⁷ Thus, whatever elements of unseen faith Sarah possessed earlier, God saw them and rewarded her accordingly. She had come to regard faithfully His promise.

²⁷ II Peter 2:7

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Are there not times when we find it hard to believe that the LORD will act in a difficult situation? In those instances we can understand Sarah. Are there not times when we believe the LORD will act, despite the cries to the contrary from others around us? In those instances we can understand a small part of God.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD (Isaiah 55:8)

Beyond these initial Old Testament personalities, listed in Hebrews 11, Paul lists others, such as Jacob, Joseph, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. Then he lists events without naming those coupled with the events. We can, however, in many instances, make a credible guess at their names.

Apostles Paul and Peter were both believed to have been executed during the horrifying reign of Nero (A.D. 67-68). Paul was beheaded; Peter crucified, but upside down, saying himself that he was not worthy to be crucified in the same manner as his LORD.

James, the son of Zebedee, was executed by Herod Agrippa I around A.D. 44. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, is reported to have been crucified in Patrae in Achaia. Philip is believed to have died in Hierapolis. Matthew is said to have died as a martyr in Ethiopia. Thomas, whose ministry extended as far east as India, was slain with a lance. James, the son of Alphaeus (also known as Thaddeus), was thrown from the temple heights, stoned and beaten to death with a club. Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Jesus, died by his own hand. Of Bartholomew and Simon the Canaanite, there is no recorded information regarding their deaths.

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Putting It All Together

Several years ago, on one of our mission trips to Mexico, I was informed, upon arrival, that I was to speak to a plenary session of the Annual Conference that was in session. For some time, the LORD had been infusing some thoughts into my mind –thoughts that I understood He had prepared in me for my address to the missionaries.

That day, while the missionaries were at lunch, I wandered through the conference room, with the specific purpose of learning what they were currently reading. To my amazement, the books were clearly in line with what the LORD had been preparing me to say.

Years have passed, and thus I have forgotten many of the specifics of that meeting. What I do recall, however, is the basic thesis of my address. It was: “We’ve got to *be* something before we can *do* something,” and “We’ve got to become *nothing* before we can become *something*.”

What was said that day resonated well with my hearers. It now occurs to me that the same message is applicable to those who would wish to have power with God. Far too often we’ve attempted to do something for the LORD without belonging to Him as we had ought. When failure occurred, we adjusted our thinking to the belief that what we had attempted was not His will, not His will *for us*, or simply not His will *for that time*. While these are feasible conclusions, it is also more than possible that we were attempting to do a good thing in our own strength instead of His.

During our time in Australia, the *Australian Baptist* carried a story of Southern Baptist missionaries working in Southeast Asia. You could almost “feel” the vibration of the missionary’s excitement as he wrote, “We have tried for so long to accomplish this; we finally just gave it over to the LORD. What we were unable to realize in 20 years, the LORD did inside two weeks!”

The missionaries had simply come to the end of themselves; they were “shut up to faith.” Having thought they were out there to accomplish something for God, He demonstrated that they were out there to “learn of Me.”

Before The Prayer of Jabez

This is a practical principle of basic Christian theology. What is more, it translates well into the arena of prayer. When we become what He saved us to become –spiritual children, who are totally dependent upon their Heavenly Father– He demonstrates *to* us and *through* us who He really is and what He can do. Prayer is therefore dependent upon our yieldedness to Him. The more like Christ we become, the more anxious the Father is to respond to our prayers. The more like Christ we become, the greater His responses to our prayers. For it is then that the indwelling Holy Spirit is doing the asking. And the Father has pledged to answer all of His requests.

Yes, there is reality and power in the prayer of Jabez. We simply must not forget the *righteousness* that characterized his life; for that righteousness –the LORD’s righteousness– enabled his prayer. It also enabled the LORD’s willingness to respond.

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