

I invite you to open your Bibles to this morning's scripture text, which can be found in the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Chronicles, chapter 4: verses 9-10. This can be found on page \_\_\_ in your pew Bibles. We begin a new series today "The Blessed Life". Today's scripture reveals the power of prayer to bring God's countless blessings into your life.

Our Fathers Word

*1 Ch 4:9-10 (NKJV)*

9 Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, "Because I bore him in pain."

10 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.

This is the word of God for the people of God

Someone once said there is really very little difference between people – but that little difference makes a great deal of difference. Our new series “The Blessed Life” is about what happens when ordinary Christians decide to reach for an extraordinary life – which, as it turns out, is exactly the kind of life God promises. We will be taking a close look over the next four weeks at an obscure man in Scripture to discover the great deal of difference his prayer can have on our life, and the blessings we will receive if we follow his example. We will discover how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. It is brief and tucked away in the Bible, only one sentence with four parts, but we will soon see it contains the key to a life of extraordinary favor with God.

This obscure man is found in one place, and one place only, in the fourth chapter of the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Chronicles. His name is Jabez. 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. You may be wondering as I was, what exactly did Jabez do to rise above the rest? Why did God answer his prayer? As we will find out, his petition can radically change what we expect from God and what we experience every day by His power.

Looking at the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles, we discover an extensive narrative of a long line of genealogy of the official family tree of the Hebrew tribes, beginning with Adam and proceeding through thousands of years to Israel’s return from captivity. So many begets, generation after generation after generation. Talk about a snooze fest, if that doesn’t put you to sleep from boredom then nothing else will.

The long lists of unfamiliar and difficult names – more than five hundred of them – can make even the most devout Bible scholar turn back. About forty-four names into the fourth chapter, a story breaks through.

Something about this man caused the historian to pause, clear his throat, and switch tactics. “Ah, wait a minute!” He seems to interject. “You just have to know something about this guy named Jabez. He truly stands out in the crowd above the rest!”

Jabez doesn't stand straddling 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, and we find him hiding in the least-read section of one of the least-read books of the Bible. Jabez is remembered not for what he did, but for what he prayed – and for what happened next.

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:

- 1** Things started out badly for a person no one had ever heard of.
- 2** He prayed an unusual, one-sentence prayer.
- 3** 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, that I may not cause pain!

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

Through this series I pray you will discover the amazing truths in Jabez's prayer for blessing, and that you will be prepared to expect God's astounding answers to it, as a regular part of *your life experience*. The Jabez prayer distills God's powerful will for your future, and it reveals that your Father longs to give you so much more than you may have ever thought to ask for.

Let's imagine for a moment that we are all on a spiritual retreat 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 ask yourself.

You pause, cup your ear, 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 turn away abruptly, continuing 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.*

*Great men of the faith **pray** 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, is that they think and pray differently than those around them.

So now we must ask ourselves a question: Is it possible that God wants us to be “selfish” in our prayers? To ask for more -- and more again -- from our 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.

I used to think this way. Maybe you think like that. If you struggle with this type of prayer as I used to, I want to show you that such a prayer is not the self-centered act it might appear to be. Contrary to our initial feelings, it is a supremely spiritual one and exactly the kind of request our Father longs to hear. If we are going to be blessed, we must allow God to determine what our blessings are.

I believe you share my desire to reach for a life that will be “more honorable” 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. 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. 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.

Let's take a closer look at Jabez's story.

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.

His story 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 translation could read, "He causes (or will cause) pain."

Ouch; doesn't sound like the start of a promising life, does it? 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. Pain.

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, “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. 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.

So why not ask for one?

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

"Oh, that you would bless me indeed...!"

Don't you just love the urgency, the personal vulnerability of his plea? In Hebrew, adding "indeed" to this prayer was the equivalent to modern times like writing the request in capital letters, underlining it, making it bold, and adding five exclamation points!

In your mind, 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. 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.

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" from every pulpit. We ask God to bless the missionaries, the kids, and the food we are about to eat. It's something we say when we hear someone sneeze.

No wonder the meaning of blessing gets watered down to something vague 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 10:22 : “The Lord’s blessing is our greatest wealth; all our work adds nothing to it.”

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 petition 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 about 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.*

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

Let me tell you a story 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 secrets in heaven?* Mr. 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.

Peter finally 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 aloud. 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 lets out a deep sigh like the ones Peter has heard so many times before.

Because right 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” (Matt 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 delighted to have a child beg for his blessing, your Father is delighted to respond generously when His blessing is what you covet the most.

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 are 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 mind-set 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)

This is utterly amazing! The very nature of God is to have goodness in so much abundance that it overflows in 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.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for sending us our Lord Jesus Christ

Lord that you so lavishly bless us each and every day we give you thanks,

For freely giving us your Love and Grace we are eternally grateful.

We lift up our hearts to you crying out for your blessings upon our lives

Help us Lord to pray like Jabez did, asking that your will be done in our lives

May you choose the blessing God,

where we will receive it, when it will be bestowed upon us,

and how it will be delivered.

We desire nothing more or nothing less

than what you choose to bless us with.

Oh, that you would bless us, indeed!

May you have all the praise, all the honor, and all the glory.

Amen