

*The Prayer of Jabez*, by Bruce Wilkinson (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000). Hardcover \$9.99. 93 pages.<sup>1</sup> Reviewed by Dr. John C. Beck, Jr.

*The Prayer of Jabez* by Bruce Wilkinson has been on the market for two years and the publisher's web site says that it has sold over 9,000,000 copies. This phenomenal distribution has generated a cottage industry of Jabez paraphernalia. Though a small book, it is now available in a leather edition, teen edition, woman's edition, kid's edition, little one's edition, and gift edition. Moreover, there is a devotional, journal, Bible study, and video curriculum available. To complete the Jabez "stuff" collection, there is the 16" \_ 78" fringed Jabez Prayer Shawl with woven bands of blue and gold with the prayer appearing in the weave pattern.<sup>2</sup> With such a success in publishing and merchandising any author risks becoming a "target" by those who wish they had come up with the idea first. The critics, however, have only themselves to blame. Apparently, they failed to pray the prayer of Jabez:

*And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying,  
"Oh, that you would bless me indeed,  
and enlarge my territory,  
that Your hand would be with me,  
and that You would keep me from evil,  
that I may not cause pain!"  
So God granted him what he requested.  
(1 Chronicles 4:10 NKJV)*

---

<sup>1</sup> This book by Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), has ninety-three actual pages. Three pages of advertisements for additional Jabez merchandise appear at the back of the book, so some might say that it is a ninety-six page book.

<sup>2</sup> See the Christian Book Distributors, "Spring 2002 Catalogue," P.O. Box 7000, Peabody, MA 01961-7000; [www.christianbook.com](http://www.christianbook.com).

In the preface Wilkinson tells the reader,

I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers. . . . This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by His power.

There is no doubt that this prayer has changed the life of Bruce Wilkinson and the lives of thousands who have read his testimony and applied these principles to their own lives. However, before delving into this book, it is important to remember that the Lord has described mankind in terms of sheep. Sheep are easily led. When an author offers the promise of “a daring prayer that God always answers,” it is important at the beginning not to mislead the sheep with the impression that God is a heavenly “short order cook.” Since this reviewer is not writing a book on prayer, let me say once that the answer to prayer is not always “yes.” Sometimes the answer to prayer is “no” or “wait.” Wilkerson includes this fact later in the book, but the damage is done. The reader has been misled and might miss a caveat, or a condition to prayer, casually mentioned later on in the book.

Dr. Bruce Wilkinson introduces the prayer of Jabez by recounting his own experience when he was a senior in seminary. At this time he was trying to determine from God what he should do after graduation. A seminary chapel message that week discussed the prayer of Jabez, so he decided to try it himself. Wilkinson writes, “The next morning, I prayed Jabez’s prayer word for word. And the next. And the next. Thirty years later, I haven’t stopped.”<sup>3</sup> Wilkinson further explains,

If you were to ask me what sentence—other than my prayer for salvation—has revolutionized my life and ministry the most, I would tell you that it was the cry of a gimper named Jabez, who is still remembered not for what he did, but for what he prayed—and for what happened next.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Jabez.*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

It appears at this point that Wilkinson attributes a recitation of this prayer for revolutionizing his life and ministry. This resembles the story of a man who drank himself into intoxication every night from work. Monday he drank Vodka and water, Tuesday was Gin and water, Wednesday he had Vermouth and water, Thursday was Tequila and water, and Friday he drank whisky and water. A friend asked him what he thought was causing him to get drunk every night. The man answered, "It must be the water." A similar misconception is possible for the readers of Wilkinson's book. The "effect" is spiritual growth and increased ministry. But the "cause" is wrongly attributed to the recitation of a prayer, not to the faithfulness found in the life of the one who believes God and experiences the presence of the Lord in his life. This is not a critique of the content of this book, because this truth (believe and do) appears in a caveat in the last chapter:

"Of course, what you *know about* this or any other prayer won't get you anything. . . . It's only what you believe will happen *and therefore do next* that will release God's power for you and bring about a life change."<sup>5</sup>

However, even this expression of the message is unclear. Does Wilkinson mean if you believe something will happen that it will happen? Or does he mean that if you believe in the God to whom Jabez prayed that something will happen? The questions critique a certain misrepresentation of the character of God. At the beginning of the book God seems to answer all your prayers and then the end of the book casually mentions an occasional limitation without a clear scriptural foundation and explanation. For example, Wilkinson warns,

"The only thing that can break this cycle of abundant living is sin, because sin breaks the flow of God's power. . . . I encourage you to rush back into God's presence and make things right, whatever it takes."<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 87. Note that this caveat appears on the eighty-seventh page of a ninety-three page book.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 85.

What does it take? This would be a good time to enlighten the reader on such an important subject. *The Prayer of Jabez* attempts to present spiritual truth as a motivational speaker who, through persuasive speech laced with powerful phrases, could sell block ice to an Eskimo.

In chapters 2–5, Wilkinson explains the four major requests in the prayer of Jabez. The first request is, “Oh, that you would bless me indeed!” Wilkinson entitles this chapter “So Why Not Ask?” He emphasizes the importance of seeking God’s blessing in our lives. This blessing is defined as, “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.”<sup>7</sup> After Wilkinson defines the concept of the blessing he adds this comment about Jabez, “He left it entirely up to God to decide what the blessings would be and where, when, and how Jabez would receive them.”<sup>8</sup> But, by the end of the chapter, Wilkinson seems to veer away from this Jabez pattern when he suggests, “What counts is knowing who you want to be and asking for it.”<sup>9</sup> Whether Jabez left the outcome up to God, or if the petitioner has some input in determining the outcome by asking for “who you want to be,” there is, according to Wilkinson, a guarantee. “Let me tell you a guaranteed by-product of sincerely seeking His blessing: Your life will become marked by miracles.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than using an exegetical approach to open up the scripture for the reader’s understanding, Wilkinson leans on the motivational approach that might be useful in a sales meeting, “Let’s get out there and do it! Your success is guaranteed! You can sell those \_\_\_\_\_!”

The second request is, “Oh, that You would enlarge my territory!” Wilkinson entitles this chapter “Living Large for God” and recounts how Christian executives have asked, “Is it right for me to ask God for more business?” Wilkinson’s answer is

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 24.

“Absolutely!”<sup>11</sup> This chapter title and the initial comments may have led to the critique by some that this is a version of the “prosperity gospel,” but the chapter spends over 80% of its time talking about evangelism. Wilkinson explains that Christians are left on earth “because God wants you to be moving out your boundary lines, taking in new territory for Him. . . and reaching people in His name.”<sup>12</sup> His examples of evangelistic endeavor should encourage any reader to tell others about the Savior. Though this is a book about prayer and not evangelism, the words of Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright come to mind here, “Tell others about Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit and leave the results up to God.”<sup>13</sup>

The third request is, “Oh, that Your hand would be with me!” Wilkinson calls this chapter, “The Touch of Greatness.” The direction of this chapter is that if God increases your borders, then you are going to need His hand to sustain this greater work. It is not clear from Wilkinson’s presentation of the prayer whether Jabez prayed this prayer in its completed form from the beginning, or if this prayer evolved over a period of days, months or years. And if this prayer evolved over time, would that change the way we should pray this prayer? Wilkinson writes:

Notice that Jabez did not begin his prayer by asking for God’s hand to be with him. At that point, he didn’t sense the need. Things were still manageable. His risks, and the fears that go with them, were minimal. But when his boundaries got moved out, and the kingdom-sized tasks of God’s agenda started coming at him, Jabez knew he needed a divine hand—and fast.<sup>14</sup>

Within this chapter Wilkinson includes a discussion of worship and constructs a hypothetical syllogism when he writes:

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>13</sup> This comment has been heard in a number of sessions in which Mr. Bright spoke.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 48–49.

If seeking God’s blessings is our ultimate act of worship, and asking to do more for Him is our utmost ambition, then asking for God’s hand upon us is our strategic choice to sustain and continue the great things that God has begun in our lives.<sup>15</sup>

In the opinion of this reviewer the terms of this syllogism are more of a writing technique to emphasize a point rather than the careful development of a logical argument. The antecedent (“if” clause) needs to be true for the consequent (“then” clause) part of the syllogism to be true. It is true that prayer is a part of worship (the “seeking” and “asking” of the above syllogism), but is it true to call it the “ultimate act of worship?” Worship is usually defined in terms of the adoration of God for who He is and for what He has done (creator, sustainer, redeemer). Our service and prayer are only part of the whole process, not necessarily the “ultimate” part. This chapter also includes the oxymoron, “Tragic as it might sound, the hand of the Lord is so seldom experienced by even mature Christians that they don’t miss it and don’t ask for it. They hardly know it exists.” It sounds incongruous to identify a Christian as “mature” while being ignorant of the “hand of the Lord.” “The ‘hand of the Lord’ is a biblical term for God’s power and presence in the lives of His people.”<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, on the positive side, this chapter has a positive emphasis on the need for evangelism.

Jabez’ fourth request is, “Oh that you would keep me from evil!” This chapter is titled, “Keeping the Legacy Safe.” Wilkinson tells of a fellow seminary student,

I’ll never forget overhearing a conversation in seminary between a fellow student and my mentor, Professor Howard Hendricks. The student was excited to tell Dr. Hendricks how well his life was going. “When I first came here,” he said, “I was so tempted and tested I could barely keep my head above water. But now—praise God!—my life at seminary has smoothed out. I’m not [sic] being tempted hardly at all!” But Hendricks looked deeply

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 54.

alarmed—not the reaction the student was expecting. “That’s about the worst thing I could have heard,” he told the surprised senior. “That shows me that you’re no longer in the battle! Satan isn’t worried about you anymore.”<sup>17</sup>

This was a powerful illustration and the reader would probably agree with it enthusiastically. But wait a minute. Read on three short pages later,

In my experience, most Christians seem to pray solely for strength to endure temptations—for victory over the attacks of our raging adversary, Satan. Somehow we don’t think to ask God simply to keep us away from temptation and keep the devil at bay in our lives. But in the model prayer Jesus gave his followers, nearly a quarter of its fifty words ask for deliverance: “And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matthew 6:13).<sup>18</sup>

Wilkinson says “we don’t think to ask God simply to keep us away from temptation and keep the devil at bay in our lives.” But his mentor says “That’s about the worst thing I could have heard!” Now I am confused. Who is right? Is it the mentor or his student? Has the student surpassed the mentor? Was the man in the illustration whose life in seminary had “smoothed out” tapping into a Jabez-like secret? Maybe he was benefiting from an answer to the petition found “in the model prayer Jesus gave his followers.” This chapter concludes with the encouragement that, “With the fourth plea of Jabez as part of our life, we are now ready to move up to a higher level of honor and exponentially expanding blessings.”<sup>19</sup>

By the time the reader heads for the home stretch, the prayer has now been explained, the words of encouragement from the author have been rendered, and the excitement has built for the climax of the book—the pay off. Now comes the reward for

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 74.

faithfully praying the prayer of Jabez for days, weeks, and years. The author titles chapter six “Jabez was more honorable than his brothers,” or “Welcome To God’s Honor Roll.” Wilkinson tells the reader that Jabez’s prayer “earned him a ‘more honorable’ award from God” and “that equal access to God’s favor does not add up to equal reward.... Simply put, God favors those who ask.”<sup>20</sup> It is in this context that Wilkinson refers to the saints of Hebrews 11 as “those God has placed on His honor roll.”<sup>21</sup> Herein lies one of the greatest oversights of this book. There are no examples of things going wrong in the lives of those who are fully dedicated to God and who seek to please Him in all their actions, thoughts and words. There are no instances of suffering in the lives of those praying the prayer of Jabez. One wonders, if the early believers of Hebrews chapter eleven had grasped the concept of the Jabez Prayer, as explained by Wilkinson, chapter eleven would have been a few verses shorter. We would not read:

Still others had trial of mockings and scourging, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, *in dens and caves of the earth*. And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

Hebrews  
11:36–41  
(NKJV)

Moreover, if Christians of the present age had applied the Jabez Prayer on a daily basis, we would not have the history recorded in Foxe’s Book of Martyrs. Instead of only one apostle surviving to old age (the Apostle John), the other eleven (including the Apostle Paul) could all have made it to an unforced

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 77.

comfortable retirement, instead of a martyr's death. Yes, Wilkinson does include this caveat,

I'll admit: The cycle of blessings will give your faith a good testing. Will you let God work in your life regardless of what He chooses? It will always be for your best. Will you surrender to His power and love and surprising plan for you? I hope you choose to do just that.<sup>22</sup>

But he does not explain this. It would have been helpful and would have given the reader a more realistic look at the possibilities that lie ahead for the Christian who asks God for direction.

The conclusion of the book invites the reader to "Read amazing testimonies on the prayer of Jabez or submit your own story. Visit [www.prayerofjabez.com](http://www.prayerofjabez.com). . . ." The stories submitted to the web site follow the style of testimonies found in the book. Though one testimony did refer to a medical setback after praying the prayer of Jabez, it was short and temporary, resulting in an apparent full recovery. These testimonies of both financial and health benefits experienced after praying the Jabez prayer have contributed to the criticism that this book is promoting the pseudo "health and wealth" gospel. We should observe, however, that Wilkinson does not promote this prosperity gospel and most of his illustrations show how God can use any believer to promote the proclamation of the gospel. Billy Graham has taught Christians for decades to look for these opportunities and refers to these encounters as "Divine Appointments."

The book concludes with a final testimony of how the Lord has blessed Wilkinson with abundant ministry opportunities all over the world. It all can be traced to his faithfully praying this one little prayer, he says, "I'm living proof."<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 87.

The style of writing keeps the reader's interest and moves him along to see what happens next. The illustrations are excellent and, for the most part, support the argument of the book. The book is short and, therefore, is attractive to potential readers in that it can be read in one or two sittings.

This book has its strengths and weaknesses. Over all it encourages the believer to make prayer part of his daily schedule and to expect God to act in wonderful ways. There are some valid areas for critique including the omission of any references to the reality of suffering that is part of the Christian life. Since this book has been on the market for two years Wilkinson is probably aware of its deficiencies and limitations—yet cries all the way to the bank.