

March 10, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

## Prayer of Jabez: Maximum Impact

1 Chronicles 4:9-10; Romans 15:14-24a

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons since the beginning of January we've been looking together at the subject of prayer and in particular we've been looking at particular prayers that we find in the pages of Holy Scripture. Scripture contains not only teaching about prayer but a number of different prayers and we've been focusing on just a handful of these.

- We've looked together at the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples. You can find it in Matthew, Chapter 6. We call it the Lord's Prayer – it's what Jesus taught on the subject of prayer in a formatted, memorize-able form.
- Then we looked at the prayer of Moses in Exodus Chapters 3 and 4, a prayer which has no real format. It's a discussion between God and Moses, and Moses and God, when God calls Moses to take His people out of slavery in Egypt and lead them to the Promised Land. And there is this back and forth conversation between Moses and God when Moses doesn't want to do it. But it's still a prayer. It's a living, fluid kind of a prayer that Moses speaks to God. And sometimes our prayers are going to be like that.
- Then we looked at the prayer of Hannah who comes out of the middle of nowhere. We find her in the book of First Samuel, the first and second chapters; Hannah who is childless, and this pain of childlessness is enormous. She carries it in her breast and it rises to the surface as she pours it out before God in prayer. It simply comes out of her. It's as if she cannot help it. Prayer like that is sometimes a part and parcel of our lives. Sometimes we get a 'yes' to those prayers, sometimes a 'no'; sometimes a 'wait.' In her case she received a 'yes' to her prayer. Her prayer was not only for relief of her pain but it was a cry to have a child.

And she had a child and she promised God that "if I have a child I'll hand that child back to you," which to us may seem to be rather strange – except that that really is what Christian parenting is all

about. We are given our children, as it were, on loan from God. We are always stewards of our children, and in baptism we're saying that this child is more a child of God than my child, and we're being offered the assurance that God will be faithful to us as we raise this child, in God's name for God's glory and for God's sake – and so we, as it were, hand this child back to God who is the first and true parent.

So we heard the prayer of Hannah at the beginning of First Samuel.

- And then last week we heard the prayer of Samuel himself, Samuel who was Hannah's child, the answer to her prayer; the one who was handed over to God to live in the temple from childhood. And there in the temple in a place called Shiloh he heard the voice of God one night. He did not know it was the voice of God, but went to Eli the high priest and said "you called?" Eli said, "I didn't call!" But Eli finally realized it was God who was calling, and told young Samuel that it was God: Eli believed that even though Samuel was still a child God would speak him. And God does. So Eli told Samuel that if he heard this voice again he should say, "*Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening.*" And that was a prayer. Indeed, it's a prayer which all of us need to pray, especially when it seems that God is silent, as sometimes God seems to us. "Speak Lord, for Your servant is listening" . . . servant, that's who I am, I will seek to do what You want, I am Your servant and I'm listening, I'm actively listening, I'm working at listening.

Sometimes we don't really think God speaks because we're not sure whether the voice we hear is our voice or the voice of God; and we get confused about these things. What I shared last week was one system that you can use to help become a little more assured that God is speaking to you: in listening for God, you listen not only to your conscience, you listen to other believers and you listen to the voice of God in the Scripture, in the Bible and you put that all together – the Bible, other Believers and your Conscience . . . and what do you get? Well, you get the BBC!! Listen to the BBC and you will hear the voice of God; maybe not the television but the Bible, other Believers and your Conscience. Wrap them together. God is a God who speaks. This is so foundational to our understanding of God as Christians and indeed through the Old Testament for ancient Israel.

This is who God is. So here's a prayer if we feel distant from God and God is silent: "Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening."

We come this morning to the last sermon in this particular series and I've chosen a rather obscure character who says a prayer that's recorded in scripture for us. His name is Jabez and his name means "pain." He was saddled with a name that means pain, given that name by his father and his mother because he caused his

mother great pain at his birth. "Pain" – what a terrible name to have to carry all your life – indeed, it might well have impacted how he thought of himself . . . but it didn't stop him from praying! We find his name in a list of people who are descendants of Judah in the 4th Chapter of First Chronicles. And there beside his name which is a prayer; a prayer that he prays. And it's not just a prayer that he prays but at the end of the prayer we are told that "God granted him his prayer" – a rather fascinating vignette in a seemingly insignificant passage about an insignificant person in the middle of scripture. First Chronicles Chapter 4:

*Jabez called on the God of Israel saying  
"Oh that You would bless me,  
and enlarge my border,  
and that Your hand might be with me,  
and that You would keep me from hurt and harm.  
And God granted what he asked!*

And God granted what he asked! Which to me at least means this is a prayer that we should consider praying ourselves. Perhaps God will grant us what we ask. There's no guarantee of it. We don't know Jabez's motives; we don't know his circumstances. Our lives are different from Jabez's life but maybe this prayer is a head in the right direction as to the kind of prayer that God would answer if, too, were to pray this prayer. It's certainly worth exploring or seeking to understand.

If you go back about ten or twelve years or so back to the early 2000's you would have found millions of people (literally *millions* of people) who were thinking about this prayer together. And we know that because at that time a man by the name of Bruce Wilkinson (who had set up a course called *Walk Through the Bible* which had helped many people understand the scope and story of scripture) wrote a little book called *The Prayer of Jabez*. Just a little book which sold over nine million copies. Maybe you have a copy of this little book. I have no doubt in my mind that one of the reasons for it selling nine million copies is that when some people heard about this prayer they said, "Ah! This is a quick fix to all of the problems in my life. I'll get rich if I pray this prayer. If God answered it then, then God will answer it now. I'll hold onto it as if it's a mantra as if it's a magical formula for getting exactly what I want from God."

Well, in fact, neither the book nor Bruce Wilkinson intended the book nor the prayer to be a magic formula for getting rich quick, for twisting God's arm to get what you want. But it does have to do with 'twisting God's arm' for something! – Something that is very important, and which is ultimately what I think almost all of us actually want. Let me read to you that prayer again.

*Jabez called on the God of Israel saying  
"Oh that you would bless me  
and enlarge my border  
and that your hand may be with me  
and that you would keep me from hurt and harm."*

It's not about maximizing your wealth but it is a prayer about maximizing your life! It's about asking God to give to us a life of maximum impact, a life that is effective for God and God's kingdom and for God's people and for God's world and which in the end will lead us to live a life of the greatest possible joy – a sense of satisfaction, not that our lives are perfect but that we use whatever energy or power that we had to live in the way that God wanted us to live to the fullest, to the maximum.

In some ways it's a prayer that our lives would in some measure be like the life of the apostle Paul as he describes himself in our reading, in Romans 15. When the apostle Paul writes his letter to the Romans he's probably in the city of Corinth in southern Greece. And he comes to the end of this letter (more like a theological treatise than a letter, to this point) and he shares some personal reflections with the Christians he's writing to in Rome. He says to them,

*"I want to come and visit you. But first of all I've got to take an offering to the people in Jerusalem" [Jerusalem is 750 miles to the east of where he was actually living at that time]. "And then I will come to you in Rome" [that's 1,500 miles to the west]. "And then after I've been to you in Rome I want to go on to Spain" [that's another 500 miles to the west].*

And this is all coming from a man who is growing older and older, who has suffered at the hands of all kinds of people, who when he has sailed on ships, well, they've been shipwrecked; and when he's arrived in port he's been beaten up (see 2 Corinthians 11:16-33). But he has this passion in his breast that nothing can take away as he seeks to make Jesus Christ known in places where nobody has heard of Him before.

He writes to the Philippians, even from a jail cell, and says (1:21): *"For me to live as Christ and to die is gain".* And (4:13), *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

He wanted nothing less than to live a life to the very end which would have a maximum impact for God. This, I believe, is what this prayer is about, and it's this kind of prayer that God wants to answer for your life and my life as well – that our lives are not squandered but they're lived for God to the hilt, and to the end; such a life, Jesus assures us, in which we will find our greatest joy as well.

The prayer has four different elements and I'd like to go through them one by one – four phrases, four different requests – (1) that You would bless me, and (2) enlarge my border, and (3) that Your hand will be with me, and (4) that You would keep me from hurt and harm.

- Bless me: let me know that I'm prized by You.
- Enlarge my border: lead me to the place where I can be most powerfully be used by You.
- May Your hand be with me: may I know that ultimately without Your hand I'm powerless but grant to me the power to live a life which accomplishes much for You.

- And keep me from harm: protect me from a life that is rendered in any way as being useless.

***Bless Me!*** So let's look at these one by one and we'll begin with the little request, bless me. "Oh that you would bless me!"

Some people think of this term and this request as a request to make us wealthy, a request for prosperity, as if to say, "Bless me with abundance of all the things in this world." But that's really not the point (though prosperity may be one result of being blessed!), and certainly not the primary understanding – which has to do with knowing that we are loved and accepted, that we have God's "blessing": "*God, let me know that I have your blessing, your word resting on me, telling me that I am loved, that I am prized, that I am of value.*"

Psychologist John Trent (*The Blessing*, 1986, co-authored with Gary Smalley) has spent much time helping people whose lives are falling apart in one way or another, and especially who cannot sustain long term relationships. He says that as he's worked with these people over the years he's found that in many of their lives there's a common theme. Often, he says, these are people who have never received parental approval – the "blessing" of one parent or another – and they have in their lives this great hole, this great vacuum that they want to fill, longing to hear those words from a significant other. And when they enter into a relationship with somebody who is not that significant other they bring that hole in their lives with them and it just doesn't seem to work out. They can't get from the relationship what they're needing because they're looking for it from someone else – this blessing from a significant other.

He tells the story of a young man by the name of Brian who was groomed by his father to be a Marine. And he grows up, he goes to school and he becomes a Marine. But he isn't in the Marines long before he's thrown out. He cannot stand the discipline there, and reacts against it and when he's thrown out and he senses his father's displeasure: he's never been able to match up, and now even more so. And then he receives the news of a heart attack that his father has, and he has to fly across the country to where his father is, hoping that when he gets there the relationship with his father can be restored; but he arrives there too late. His father is still in the hospital but he has just died and Brian shared with John Trent what happens there: he leans over his father's body and he pleads with him though he is dead, "Tell me that you love me. Tell me that you love me!" A passionate desiring that he would hear those words, that blessing from this one who is significant to him. But he could never hear it.

When we don't hear those words, when there is such a hole within our lives, we can often find ourselves trapped. Our lives cannot be lived to maximum effectiveness. We want it from a parent or we want it from some other significant other, and it doesn't come our way. But what we possess, the treasure

we possess as Christians, is the knowledge that God longs to share that blessing with every single one of us; that God says to us through Jesus Christ not only "I love you" (sometimes we hear that and it just passes on its way), but "*I adore you. I'm crazy about you. I love you passionately. There is nowhere that I would not go for you, even to death on a cross*" . . . and so we have it hanging in our sanctuary week by week the reminder of God's love for us that He prizes us, that He treasures us and He will never change His mind. And on this our lives can utterly, utterly depend. We have God's blessing – and the prayer is "*Lord let me know that. Sometimes I'm not sure of that still. Bless me and let me know that I have that as this foundation in life.*"

That's the first request and God surely wants to answer that request.

The second one is "***Expand my territory, enlarge my border.***" This is not a prayer for more property, it's not a prayer for more titles or degrees or fame, but for an area of impact and influence, more responsibility, more work where we can be used by God wherever it may be.

In the 1860s just as civil war was looming and raging here in the United States something incredible was happening in China. Today it's estimated that there are between 60 million and 105 million Christians in China. The figures of course vary because the government doesn't release the figures. You have to make estimates as to what they are but somewhere between 60 and 105 million Christians, active Christians in China today (if it's not more than in the United States now it soon will be more than in the United States even though persecution is increasing there and that's something we as Christians should keep our eye on). But much of that growth which has occurred in the last 20 or 30 years can be attributed to the work of one man back in the 1860s.

There were many missionaries in China at that time but one man had more impact than any other and his name was Hudson Taylor. In the mid-1860s he and his fellow missionaries prayed this prayer, the prayer of Jabez, and in particular this request (see *The Life of Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission*, by Dr. & Mrs. Howard Taylor, vol. 2, Chs. 8,9). They prayed (the King James translation) "Enlarge my coast." That is, broaden my territory, expand my sphere of influence, help us to live lives which are as effective as possible, as powerful as possible for You in this place. They made a decision in response to that prayer to move from the port cities in China where all the missionaries were, to go inland – to the great cities of the inland part of China. And so they established at that time what was known as the China Inland Mission. They saw great results while they were living, but nothing, nothing like what has been happening in the last 20 or 30 years where the seeds that were sown began to flourish because of this prayer: "*Lord take us where You want us to be. Expand the area within which we can live. Never let me stop too soon but use me in Your service where You want me to be. Where next?*" Like the apostle Paul – is it Italy? Is it Rome, is it on to Spain?

Wherever it is, Lord, lead me open, enlarge my coast, expand my boundaries. That was the second request.

And the third request was this: *May Your hand be with me.* May Your hand stay with me. If I am to exercise influence and power, may I know that actually without Your hand, your presence, I'm powerless. Unless You are with me I am powerless.

Author Tim Hansel (in *Holy Sweat*) tells this story of going out with his son one day – young son Zak. And they went to a place where there were some hills and some rocks that Zak could climb and Zak climbed onto these rocks and for a moment or two Tim Hansel turned his back on his son Zak. And while his back was turned Zak decided to jump off the rocks into his father's arms. So he cried out 'Hey dad, catch me.' His dad turned around and Zak had already left the rock and was on his way, and Tim Hansel's arms stretched out quickly and he fortunately grabbed his son, and said to him, 'Why did you do that? You could have fallen.' And his son said, 'Because you're my dad.' He trusted him! He knew those hands would be there and that he would be safe, and so he was empowered to do what he otherwise would never have done. Safe in the arms that could hold him and sustain him and were more powerful than his whole life put together.

This is what God wants us to know and this is what we're praying for, that we would know that God's hands are beneath us and around us and above us, blessing us all around us, and never going far away – close enough so that we can do with God what we could never do by ourselves: the power of God's presence to make us who are powerless, powerful, especially when we are moving in to the places where we can be of greatest value for God, confident that the love of God will never leave us.

And then the fourth phrase: *keep me from hurt or harm.* Keep me from hurt or harm. This is not a request for a trouble-free life, but a request that those things in life that can destroy us wouldn't destroy us – wouldn't remove from us our effectiveness, or make us destructive in the lives of others: "Lord save me from the power of evil within the world and within my life."

Over the years I've had the privilege of working with many wonderful and gifted people. And I've also had the privilege of working with some gifted people who have become ineffective in their lives for one reason or another. And what I've observed is this, that in some cases (and I've seen this repeatedly in different places), there is some sin or some weakness, some unresolved issue or some blind spot that a highly gifted person has not seen, or refuses to see, or refuses to bring under control, which render their lives far less effective than they would otherwise be. Some uncontrolled part of life in which they do themselves harm, sometimes doing harm to others, and certainly not doing the good for others that they could otherwise do. And they think 'I just don't need to handle that. I can

live effectively without sorting out this problem.’ But we can’t. These internal matters so often render us powerless and weak. “Lord,” we need to pray, “Keep me from that kind of harm.”

Sometimes we think that great leaders have it easy. Look at their lives. Everything seems to flow their way. But the truth is that there is hardly a great leader who has not had to face some difficulty or another and bring it under control; some failure or defeat, or negative opinion flowing from others, and sometimes even from friends, and have to rise above it. Our lives become ineffective when we allow those things to beat us down and we stay down.

- I’ve spoken a lot recently about Abraham Lincoln: he faced one defeat after another before he rose to the presidency.
- One of my heroes is Winston Churchill: one defeat after another before he was brought to that position to lead Britain in World War II. He has a wonderful definition for me of success (at least, it’s attributed to him!) and it’s this – that success is: *Limping from one defeat to another with great enthusiasm.*

You’re down but you’re not out. Beaten down again and again, evil, harm, whatever it is, weakness in ourselves, malice from others – but we will not let it push us off the path that God has for our lives: “Lord, save me from harm in myself or from others, that my life would be the life that you want me to live touching the lives of others.” So often those who are down can help others in ways than those who’ve never felt that can.

What a great prayer. Surely it’s the passion that all of us have, *that our lives would be used by God to the fullest* – that there isn’t an ounce left of us when we move on from this life to glory.

- Lord bless me. Let me know that You prize me.
- Lord expand my territory. Place me where I can be most powerful in your service.
- Lord may Your hand never leave me because actually I have no power unless You are there beside me and around me and within me.
- Then save me from harm or hurt or pain, those things which get in and destroy.

So be the guide of my life. So Jabez prayed and God heard his prayer and granted, as I think He will with us, what he asked.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2013 All Rights Reserved.

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800