

C. The Prayer of Jabez?

The Prayer of Jabez by Bruce Wilkinson has been feted as one of the most important pieces of Christian literature to come along in decades. Only 93 pages long, it was on the New York Times best-seller list for several weeks, having sold over 8 million copies. It was the #6 best-seller on Amazon.com. And soon to come are both a women's and children's editions. None of this is surprising when one reads some of the claims that are made regarding this book. For example, one advertiser had the following to say:

"Readers ... can release God's miraculous power and experience the blessings God longs to give each of us. The life of Jabez ... bursts from unbroken pages of genealogies in an audacious, four-part prayer that brings him an extraordinary measure of divine favor, anointing, and protection. Readers who commit to offering the same prayer on a regular basis will find themselves extravagantly blessed by God, and agents of His miraculous power, in everyday life."

New Is Not Always Good!

"Audacious" is a good word to describe this book. We should immediately become suspicious when someone introduces a "new" or novel interpretation of Scripture. It usually is a case of "audacity," rather than revelation!

Wilkinson is essentially claiming to have uncovered a truth that apparently has been missed or overlooked by the Church for the last 2,000 years.

But if this prayer is so "key" to the Christian life, why don't we find Paul, Peter, James, Luke, Matthew, Mark, or Jesus for that matter, ever making reference to it? Why, when Jesus' disciples asked Him, "Lord, teach us to pray," didn't He direct them to *the Prayer of Jabez*?

"A" Prayer, Not "The" Prayer

The answer is as obvious as it is simple: The Prayer of Jabez is "a" prayer, not "the" prayer. It is only one of many prayers in the Bible. And most of them are very different from that of Jabez. But even more importantly, *The Prayer of Jabez* is not the one Jesus recommended we pray! In direct response to His disciples' request to "Teach us how to pray," Jesus said ...

This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. (Matthew 6:9-14)

There are some similarities between the two prayers; however, there are also major differences. For example:

1. The primary objective of Jesus' prayer is not "being blessed" but blessing God, doing His will, and building His kingdom. It's not about "expanding my borders" but His. Sometimes this means, as John the Baptist explained, "He must increase, but I must decrease"(John 3:30). Or as C.S. Lewis once pointed out about prayer: "Prayer doesn't change God; it changes me!"
2. In terms of personal needs, I am to be "content" with "daily bread," not with an ever-increasing portfolio. Jesus then goes to great length to expand on this concept (Matthew 6:19-34).
3. Jesus is far more concerned that we be "forgiven" and "forgiving" than for us to be blessed and successful. In fact, Jesus said we should "give no anxious thought" about such things, and Paul warned Timothy that there were false teachers who taught "gain is godliness." He countered such empty notions by reminding us "godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:5-10).

A Formula Or A Relationship?

If the claims of *The Prayer of Jabez* are in fact true, one would be crazy not to buy the book and follow its formula. But then again, this is one of my biggest problems with the book. It promotes a formula rather than a relationship.

If there is any one thing that should be characteristic of Christianity, it is not religion but a relationship with God through the person of Jesus Christ. Religion is basically a set of formulas, or if you prefer, ritualized prayers and acts, designed to induce the deity to give me what I want.

In contrast, a relationship is a heart-level communication with another person. What Jesus did by His death and resurrection, was to make relationship possible. Prior to His atonement, all most men could do was approach God through rituals or formulas. But when Jesus died, the separating veil of the Temple was torn in two, and the way into the Throne of Grace was opened to all who would believe (Hebrews 4:16).

It was out of a concern that men would reduce Christianity into formulas (and/or rituals) that Jesus told His disciples regarding prayer:

And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.
(Matthew 6:7)

Jesus knew the essence of pagan worship is formula. Adherents are promised that if they repeat certain specific phrases in an exacting manner they would gain the desired results. This is the direct opposite of what we are offered in Christ.

What About Vain Repetitions?

Isn't "vain repetitions" exactly what Wilkinson is recommending to his readers? They are challenged to repetitiously pray this prayer at least once a day for 30 days, with the promise God will do great things in their lives. This sounds very much like the very thing Jesus tells us "not" to do. As Thayer points out in his Lexicon of New Testament words, "babble" as it is used in Matthew 6:7 means "to repeat the same things over and over."

What seems to be misunderstood by many is that prayer is intimate communication with God, not repetitious chanting of a magical mantra. Essentially, God is looking for a relationship with us, based on love, faith, trust and increasing intimacy. Formulas (even prayer formulas) destroy the relational aspect of prayer. God is no longer “our Father.” Instead He is a genie we rub to get our wishes, or a giant vending machine that gives us what we want if we push the right buttons.

I Must Decrease ...?

I want to emphasize that I see nothing wrong with a person prospering financially, or in any other way for that matter. But the question we need to ask is: “Is this always the will of God?”

Remember when Peter said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you” (Matthew 19:27)? Jesus responded by telling them all their present losses would be repaid abundantly “in the renewal of all things.” In other words, they wouldn’t see their reward here but in the millennial kingdom at the end of the age.

And what about the Apostle Paul who said he had suffered the loss of everything? Yet he went on to declare that he counted such loss next to nothing in comparison to ...

The surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:8-11)

My point is this: God may choose to “enlarge” my spiritual borders by shrinking my “material borders.” He may even allow my health to deteriorate so I can learn, along with Paul, that His “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). After all, wasn’t it David who said in Psalm 116:15, “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.” And it was Jesus who said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). I fear that those who read this book will miss this part of the Christian life, and that they will completely miss the biblical concept of living sacrificially.

Anything Redeeming In This Book?

There are three things I liked about this book:

1. It does a great job of emphasizing our God is a good, gracious and benevolent God who loves and desires to bless and do great things through the lives of ordinary people. However it overlooks the fact that sometimes God’s blessings can come through adversity, that sometimes He adds to my life by subtracting. Often I can only increase by first decreasing. Or as a friend of mine put it, “Sometimes the way up is the way down.”
2. I liked his emphasis on God’s place as the causative effect in the world. Blessings come from Him, not simply from hard work and determination.

But at the same time, there is no emphasis on seeking God's will before one sets out on a venture. A group of students are challenged to "dream big," but nothing is said about making sure your dreams are God's will.

3. The book may encourage people to pray. But if their prayers are little more than "vain repetitions," then the cure may be worse than the disease.

Additionally, I am concerned people will pray with the wrong motives and expectations. When they have followed the formula and don't get the results they want, will they become angry and hardened against God?

Would I Recommend This Book?

I could not recommend this book without serious reservation. I would caution anyone who reads it to do so with a critical eye. Compare what Wilkinson writes with what the Bible says. This I believe is necessary because as Dr. Ron Gleason points out in his evaluation of the Prayer ...

In terms of the standard rules of interpretation, ... I believe Wilkinson has made some "quantum leaps" and, at times, has somewhat forced the text to say and mean what he wants it to say and mean. To have taken such an obscure prayer and developed a whole theology around it would have, I think, required a lot more explanation regarding the "grammatico-historical" context of the prayer itself. Since it is totally lacking, it appears that Wilkinson — like so many other scholars — doesn't know why this prayer was inserted where it was or simply doesn't think it's important to know. There is too much in the book that is just "slipshod work."

Final Thoughts

Personally I think *the Prayer of Jabez* provides little real value to the Church. I believe its incredible popularity says more about us than it does about God or the Bible. We live in a time in which biblical ignorance, both in and out of the Church, is at an all-time high. We are not only ignorant of what the Bible says but also of any solid basis for interpreting what it says. Most Christians know certain things about the Bible but have little real grasp of the Bible as a whole. They know it in parts but don't grasp its overall character.

For many the Bible is little more than a book of magic phrases. When it is read, little attention is given to the historical or grammatical context. They simply find a phrase they like, and like the Hindu or New Ager, turn it into a mantra to be repeated as the need arises.

Frankly, I am very surprised to see a book like this come from someone like Wilkinson. As the president of Walk Through The Bible, I expected more.

My recommendation? Don't waste your time and money on this book. Read the Bible instead!