

A Prayer of Blessing

Scripture: 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

When we think of the concept of blessing, we often think of the prayer we say before we eat. I suppose every family has a funny story about some verbal mishap during the grace before meals.

I heard about a dad named Bob who had been teaching his little girl, Jenny, to say grace. After a few weeks of coaching, Jenny was ready to do a solo blessing. She started out fine, thanking God for mommy and daddy, brother and sister, for the rolls, the salad, and the drinks. She ended the prayer with a big, "And thank you, God, for the spaghetti!" Then she lifted her head up and was ready to eat.

Jenny had forgotten how Bob had taught her to end the prayer, by saying, "In Jesus' name, amen!" Bob tried to help her remember by prompting her, "In...what?" Jenny was confused for a second, then her light came on and she proudly finished, "In tomato sauce! Amen!"

Sometimes the kids just don't quite understand what we're doing with the blessing. One three-year-old named Daniel spent the weekend with his grandparents, where he was introduced to the practice of saying grace before meals. Daniel's parents didn't do that, so he watched curiously every time his grandpa asked the blessing.

When his parents came to pick him up, they all stayed for lunch. Daniel's dad started right away to pick up his sandwich, but Daniel stopped him. "Wait, Daddy," he said, "we can't eat 'till Grandpa reads his plate."

Maybe we're all a little confused by this idea of blessing. If you think all we're talking about is grace before meals, I want to expand your concept of blessing today. I want to do that with a little jewel of Scripture that's tucked away into one of the most boring passages in the entire Bible. In fact, I think it's a miracle that anyone ever found this little prayer at all, because it appears in the midst of a long and tedious genealogy of Israel. The author takes a short break in the monotony to say a special word about a man named Jabez. Jabez was honored more than all his brothers, despite the fact that his name meant "labor pain." How would you like the other kids on the playground calling you that all your growing up years? Maybe as a way to cope with the difficulties of his life, Jabez had a favorite prayer that was significant enough that the chronicler recorded it for all time: "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain" (1 Chronicles 4:9-10).

*This little prayer swept the country a couple of years ago because of a small book called *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* by Bruce Wilkinson, an evangelist based in Atlanta, Georgia. How many of you have read it? The phenomenal success of the book is proof that it has touched people's hearts and minds*

and lives, and I want to share with you today a few ways this prayer can touch your life with the power of God.

Number one, God wants to bless us. He made us; he loves us; and he wants our lives to be filled with all good things. Like any good father, his desire is to see his children happy and fulfilled. Too often we get the idea that God wants our lives to be like Jabez' name—a pain!

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, one of the most positive preachers of the 20th century, had a friend from Lebanon named Musa Alami. Musa lived in the desert near the Jordan River not far from Jericho. Musa had a dream, based on his acquaintance with irrigation projects in other parts of the world, to see the Jordan River Valley blossom and flourish with crops. Other people looked at the bleak desert landscape and laughed at Musa's dream. But with a few poor refugees from a Jericho refugee camp, Musa began to dig in the desert, not with steam shovels or earth movers, but with picks and shovels. After six months of grueling labor in the desert, Musa and his motley crew finally struck water deep under the desert sand. When water, fresh water, began to fill up the hole they had dug, Musa Alami didn't shout or cheer or laugh at all. He was so overwhelmed he wept, because God had blessed his dream with success. Today, thousands of acres are yielding fruits and vegetables in abundance because of one man's persistent dream and his faith in the blessing below the surface.

Isn't that just like God? If we will dig beneath the surface of the desert landscape of our lives, God will bring blessings gushing forth, abundant and refreshing and productive. That's his promise. Remember how Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened" (Matthew 7:7-8).

Our problem is that we don't open up our lives for all the blessings God wants us to have. I don't know if it's ignorance or lack of faith or fear, but most of us act like the guy who had just moved to the country and bought himself a cow. He came into the feed store one day complaining that his cow was going dry. The feed store owner asked him if he was feeding her right.

"I'm doing just what you told me to do" the man replied.

"Are you milking her every day?" the feed man asked.

"Just about," the city slicker replied. "If I need a cup of milk for breakfast, I go out and get it. Of course, if I don't need any milk, I don't milk her; I just let her store it up."

The feed store owner had to explain that it didn't work that way. To get the cow to produce abundant milk, you have to milk her completely every day, or else she will dry up. The unfortunate thing about many Christians is that they are content with just a little blessing from God every once in a while, and soon even that source of blessing

dries up. We have been asking for ounces, when there are gallons of grace available to us. The Letter of James says, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2).

Jabez knew how to ask. He prayed, "Oh, that you would bless me indeed! Not just a little bit, not just an ounce, not just enough to get by, but bless me indeed. Bless me a lot. Bless me big time. Bless me abundantly. That's what God wants to do to you.

Number two, God wants us to have success. We're not talking about cars and boats and big houses here. God wants us to have a life that is spiritually successful. He wants us to have a successful witness, a successful ministry, successful relationships with him and other people. That's worth more than any material possession.

There's nothing wrong with praying for success, when you're praying for success in the will of God. The Psalmist sang, "This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! But do you know the verse that comes right after that? "O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success" (Psalm 118:24-25). Jabez prayed that God would enlarge his territory. Our spiritual territory is the influence we have with other people in sharing the good things of God. We pray that God would use us to touch more and more people with the good news of Jesus Christ, and we will be successful.

The measure of a Christian's success is not how much money you make or what you own, but how many people you touch and how you touch them. Sometimes you may not even realize how successful you really are until you look back at the influence you have had in some people's lives.

I love the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*. It's about a frustrated musician in Portland, Oregon, who takes a job as a band director in the 1960s. Thinking the job is only temporary, he lets himself be diverted from his goal to become a famous composer. Little by little, Mr. Holland's life is taken up with the demands of teaching and raising a family, especially after he learns that his only son is deaf. After a while he gives up on the famous composer dream and just does his best with all he has to deal with every day.

After 35 years teaching band, Mr. Holland finds out one day that the school board, because funds are short, has decided to cut the music and drama programs. A short detour into teaching had become his mission in life, and now even that was being taken away.

At the end of the movie, Mr. Holland and his wife and son are cleaning out his room, and as they leave the building, they hear a noise coming from the auditorium. Mr. Holland opens the door to find an auditorium packed with current and former band students and a big banner that says, "Good-bye, Mr. Holland! As he enters, the crowd of friends gives him a standing ovation.

The speaker for the gathering is the governor of the state of Oregon, who was a student that Mr. Holland helped believe in herself when she was in his class. She speaks for everyone as she says, "Mr. Holland had a profound influence on my life (on

a lot of lives, I know), and yet I get the feeling that he considers a great part of his life misspent. Rumor has it he was always working on this symphony of his, and this was going to make him famous and rich (probably both). But Mr. Holland isn't rich, and he isn't famous. At least not outside our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure, but he'd be wrong. Because I think he has achieved a success far beyond riches and fame."

Then the Governor looks at Mr. Holland and says, "Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each one of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life."

Enlarge our territory, Lord, so that we might touch others more and more for you!

Number three, God wants us to have power. *After Jabez asked God to enlarge his territory, he prayed that God's hand would be with him. In other words, he expected the only way he would achieve success would be if God helped him and provided the empowerment to do the tasks he was called to do. We can only be blessed if God gives us the blessing. We can only succeed if God gives us success. The power is his.*

We don't tend to operate that way, do we? We believe in human mathematics. Bruce Wilkinson says that the human equation goes like this: "My abilities + experience + training + my personality and appearance + my past + the expectations of others = my assigned territory' But God's math is very different. His equation says, "My willingness and weakness plus God's will and supernatural power equals my expanding territory." In other words, if we depend on God for the power, he will give us success far beyond what we could ever accomplish on our own power and intelligence and skill. God loves to do the impossible, and if what we dream is not impossible, then we don't need God!

Wilkinson's example of this prayer principle is a summer ministry for teenagers that he did while he was a youth pastor in New Jersey. Their youth group took on Long Island as an evangelism mission, and when they were told to expect 13 or 14 people to show up at their backyard gatherings, they began to pray for a hundred children at each of six parties. Four of the six groups had over a hundred children show up. They expanded their mission to the beaches of Long Island, and the very first day, when they gave the invitation, 30 people came forward to accept Christ. Then they added youth services in the local churches, and after six weeks of intensive evangelistic efforts in the Long Island area, 1,200 people had made decisions to know the Lord Jesus. That was impossible—except for the power of God!

What if you began to believe God for the power to do the impossible at your church? Do you believe God can bring you more children and youth than you have ever ministered to before? Pray for it! Do you believe God can open the doors of opportunity and fill your church with people every Sunday? It may be humanly impossible—but not for God! Pray for it!

God wants to bless us and give us success, and he will give us the power to succeed, if we'll just depend on him. As Bruce Wilkinson says, "For the Christian, dependence is just another word for power."

Finally, number four; God wants to protect us. You just try living for God and trusting in him and depending on his power, and see if you don't have a fight on your hands! At the first sign of a growing faith, the spiritual forces of wickedness will jump on your back and try to pry your fingers out of the hand of God. Every success brings renewed possibility of failure. Every evidence of strength makes the Evil One try to exploit your weakness. It's scary, unless you know where your protection lies.

Pastor Steve Nickles has a three-year-old daughter named Sara, and he recently bought her a small aquarium with four fish in it. The first fish died when Sara was away at her grandparents, and her mother just flushed it down the toilet and didn't tell Sara about it. But Sara discovered the second dead fish when she got home. It had become entangled in the plastic bushes in the aquarium. Steve's wife called him at the office and said that Sara wanted to talk to her dad. In her three-year-old way, Sara explained that the fish had died, she had found it in the bushes, and that she and mommy were going to have a funeral for it in the back yard.

It's sad enough to realize that your child has just experienced the first of many losses in his or her life, but what really got to Steve was the last thing Sara said before she hung up the phone: "Daddy, keep me from getting caught in the bushes."

Your heavenly Father wants to protect you from getting caught in the bushes. God will keep you from the power of evil. Jesus told his disciples to pray for deliverance from evil. Jabez prayed that God would keep him from evil, so that he would not cause pain. Isn't that interesting? The one who had to live with the burden of the name "Pain" all his life long prayed that he would stay away from evil and not cause any more: no more pain to himself, no more pain to others, no more pain to God by turning away from him. We will experience pain in this life; there's no way around that. But when the tough times come, we can depend on the protection of God to save us from the power of evil and give us the victory through the trial. Whatever happens, he is there.

Whatever happened to old Jabez? We don't really know. He sort of pops up in this genealogy, and we never hear from him again. Except we do know this. The Scripture says, "God granted his request" (1 Chronicles 4:10). God said "Yes!" to Jabez. He gave Jabez the victory of the blessed life. And if you pray to the same God for blessing, success, power, and protection, I believe with all my heart that you will find the blessed life as well.

There's no imagining what God can do with a life that is dependent on him. There's no imagining what God might even do with you. Let's pray this prayer of blessing today, and I want to invite you to continue praying it in the days and weeks ahead, and let's just see what God will do with us: **"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. Amen."**