Should Christians be learning how to pray Jabez's prayer?
Scripture: Luke 18:1-7; Matthew 6:9-13; James 4:3
Code: QA64

What is your opinion of the new best-selling book The Prayer of Jabez?

Should Christians be learning how to pray Jabez's prayer?

The Prayer of Jabez, by Dr. Bruce Wilkinson, has gained enormous popularity in the Christian community. Within the last year it has sold more than 4 million copies-3.5 million in the last four months alone-and has maintained a first-place ranking on many national best-seller lists. The author is a distinguished Bible teacher and founder of Walk thru the Bible Ministries. His organization, which hosts more than 2,500 Bible conferences annually, is designed to train Christians in a fundamental understanding of both the Old and New Testaments.

Wilkinson's book is a study on Jabez's prayer recorded in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. Dr. Wilkinson's purpose is to encourage believers to continually look to Jabez's prayer as a model to follow if they expect to receive great blessing from and accomplish great things for God. Dr. Wilkinson writes, "This petition has radically changed what I expect from God and what I experience every day by his power" (p. 7). In fact, he continues to express throughout the book the need for Christians to pray this prayer, so they too can experience a radical change in their life.

We commend much within *The Prayer of Jabez*.

For example, Dr. Wilkinson rightly emphasizes the importance of prayer in the Christian life. All Christians should commune with the Lord in prayer. Jesus, for example, gave his disciples an outline to follow in prayer (Matthew 6:9-13) and fashioned a parable to encourage persistence in prayer (Luke 18:1-7). Following the Lord's lead, *The Prayer of Jabez* does an excellent job of emphasizing the need for cultivating a rich prayer life.

Another helpful focus of the book is its exhortation for Christians to focus their prayers on ministry and not on personal desires. That is noteworthy as many of today's popular books encourage prayer merely for individual gain. They assert that God owes blessings to them, and they should ask Him for anything they desire. Dr. Wilkinson never encourages that attitude. Though he states God will bless the believer, the blessing will come in the form of more and more opportunities to minister to others in need. Answered prayer, Dr. Wilkinson reminds us, is born out of proper motives (James 4:3).

With those commendations in mind, however, there are some areas of concern in *The Prayer of Jabez*.

First of all, the book leaves the door open for Christians to presume upon God. Wilkinson writes, "I want to teach you how to pray a daring prayer that God always answers." (p. 7, emphasis added). Though it is true that God hears the prayers of His saints, there is no guarantee that He will always answer them in the expected manner. To suggest to the reader that God will always answer those who pray Jabez's prayer greatly overstates reality.

Furthermore, that expectation could lead believers to experience disappointment with God. Someone might feel justified complaining that he prayed the "model prayer of Jabez" but God never answered. The truth is, there could be other reasons for God's silence, such as our own unconfessed sin or impure motives. Or perhaps God's plan for that person is far different from what they asked for in prayer. Dr. Wilkinson does not clarify his statement, but repeatedly claims throughout the book that God will most assuredly answer the "Jabez" prayer, a claim that oversimplifies all God's Word says about prayer.

The book also tends to trivialize the discipline of prayer by making the words of Jabez's prayer the formula to follow. Wilkinson encourages Christians to repeat the words of Jabez's prayer regularly. But Jesus spoke against that kind of rote prayer style in Matthew 6:7, where He warned His disciples not to use vain, repetitious prayers. Rather, Christians should pray to God with heartfelt sincerity. Simply repeating the prayer of Jabez daily runs the risk of reducing a believer's prayer life to vain repetition.

Moreover, *The Prayer of Jabez* can also create confusion about the importance of the many other prayers throughout the Bible. Does Jabez's prayer somehow take precedence over Jesus' model of prayer in Matthew 6:9-13? Are Paul's prayers worth imitating? Do the prayers of other Old Testament saints help us better understand prayer any more or any less than Jabez's? Focusing solely on Jabez's brief prayer implicitly ascribes to it some kind of magical character it does not possess. Certainly, Jabez's prayer is a very good model, but it does not have any inherent ability to unlock God's power in the Christian life. Unfortunately, Dr. Wilkinson's book does little to dissuade such conclusions about the prayer.

Finally, *The Prayer of Jabez* paints an inconsistent picture of the Christian life. Wilkinson asserts that praying Jabez's prayer leads to a life of incredible blessing and ever-increasing ministry opportunities-a life that sounds almost like a fairy-tale. However, little reference is ever made to the reality of genuine difficulties in life, and the necessity of sincere prayer to face those difficulties in a God-honoring way. Furthermore, Dr. Wilkinson fails to encourage the importance of faithfulness in the mundane circumstances of daily living. He seems to indicate that real Christian living is only happening when Christians encounter regular miracles and astounding ministry opportunities in life.

Scripture, however, points to the importance of learning to live a life fixed on pleasing God in all the little details in life-attitudes, thoughts, words, and behavior. *The Prayer of Jabez* fails to exhibit biblical balance in that regard.

In conclusion, The Prayer of Jabez can be a helpful tool because it encourages Christians to look to Jabez's prayer as one of many biblical models of prayer worthy of emulation. You can look to Jabez's prayer along with the prayers of other Bible characters in an effort to better inform your own prayer life. But remember, true prayer does not consist of a set of mantras or incantations employed to elicit a particular response from God. God is not a genie in a bottle, waiting to be coaxed out so He can grant wishes. Rather, prayer is about aligning your mind and heart with God's sovereign purposes.

Prayer is a rich privilege God graciously grants to His children, enabling us to express our submission to His will for our lives. To that end, may we all learn to pray with the humility, dependence, and expectation of blessing Jabez exhibited.

For more information on how you can strengthen your prayer life, consider these resources:

Available online at: http://www.gty.org
COPYRIGHT (C) 2013 Grace to You
You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright).