

Connie is working on her family tree. She is slowly working her way up her family tree by taking pictures of their tombstones. There is a local chain of convenience stores called Kwik Trip. She has taken a lot of grief from us as we head out to the cemeteries, as another 'crypt trip.' Let's meander through one of these cemeteries.



- The first thing we notice about each cemetery is its age. A new cemetery usually has a pretty good endowment for upkeep, the tombstones are the kind you can drive a mower over, and the trees are not full height. An older cemetery will have mature trees, vertical tombstones, and a lack of upkeep. Some cemeteries are so old that there is no one left to care for them and appear derelict.
- Tombstones have really changed over time. The oldest ones are carved from a soft white stone and age has erased most of the carving. Usually there is just a name and a date of birth and death. Their life was represented by a dash between those dates.
- Newer styles are horizontal bronze ones. I am starting to see vertical tombstones caved with boats, campers, hunting scenes and even some with digital screens on them to give us an idea of the deceased's life.

You can tell the 'somebody's' from the 'nobody's' by the size and extravagance of their tombstone. Today's message is about a 'nobody' who became a 'somebody' because he prayed.

This fall, we are doing some Biblical character studies. There is a lot we can learn about the success and failures of our spiritual ancestors.

Today's biography is longer than a dash, but it is very short; it is only two verses long. I can retell his story in five words, 'Jabez prayed and was blessed.' It is short enough to be an epitaph.

Jabez – Blessing

Here is how it reads in First Chronicles.

1. The Story.

'There was a man named Jabez who was more honorable than any of his brothers. His mother named him Jabez because his birth had been so painful. ¹⁰ He was the one who prayed to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless



me and expand my territory! Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain!" And God granted him his request (1Chr 4:9-10 NLT).'

That's it. Success reveals character (more honorable), humility (pain) precedes blessing.

- Most stories start with an ideal situation that is interrupted by a crisis.
- Then the story is the actions and events that bring the main character back to the ideal situation.
- Jabez' story begins with pain and moves to blessing.

Let's start with a little background.

We don't know why she named him 'pain,' but there are two options. Twice Painful?

1. His birth was painful - Jabez = pain. His name is a pun, a play on the Hebrew word for anguish, sorrow, and pain.
 - He had some brothers - but are they older or younger?
 - If he is not the oldest, then there was something abnormally painful about his birth.
2. Post-Exile Israel. Perhaps his painful birth was because of her circumstances. It occurred around the return from Babylonian captivity (538 B.C., Ezra 1:1).
 - We can date 1st Chronicles to post-exile.¹
 - The refugees returned to a wild land. What once were vineyards and farmable fields are now thistles, wild hedges and wild animals. The people had to make booths out of branches to live (Ne 8:17). There is minimal functioning government.
 - Perhaps his mother is widowed. She gives birth on the journey from Babylon in the desert. Or she and the other boys are living under a tree. Perhaps he was breech and if a neighboring midwife had not come along, they both would have died.

How would you like to be named ugly, stupid, bad luck, or painful?

- It would stick to you like glue every time you were called or mentioned.
- Chances are you would live up to that name, or at least see yourself through that lens. There are low expectations.

¹ It has no Greek words but a lot of Persian words – which dates the book to right after the exile (400 B.C.), Jacob Myers, *The Anchor Bible 1 Chronicles* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1965), pp. LXXXVIII-LXXXIX.

The story has an interesting placement in the book of First Chronicles.

2. The Story's Placement.

Like Connie's ambition to trace her lineage up the ladder, this section of First Chronicles is a genealogy tracing David's ancestry up the ladder to Judah.

- This genealogy is 'to show God's elective and preserving grace ... to show how David and Judah were chosen by God.'²
- But out of nowhere the author breaks the flow of the genealogy. He stops to look at a large tombstone with a significant epitaph. There is something special about it even though it is unrelated to David or Judah and their lineage.³
- The author pauses as if to say, 'here is what I am talking about' – God has promised to bless his people.

Deuteronomy 28:1-11, contains God's hope / covenant for Israel. He wants to bless His people.

God blesses Israel, Dt 28:1-11.

- Because he loves them.
- It brings Him pleasure.
- It brings Him glory.

God's blessing is conditioned upon 'If you obey the Lord your God (Dt 28:2 NIV).'

- I believe the author of First Chronicles is saying, 'Oh Israel, you have returned broken and sorrowful from Babylon, but if you will ask God and obey Him, He will again bless you. Just look at Jabez.'

Jabez 'was more honorable than any of his brothers.' That line was written after he lived his life.

- He overcame the stigma of his name.
- 'He ended his days with more honor, higher status, and greater influence than any and all of his brothers.'⁴

Here is how it happened.

3. Jabez' Prayer.

² Charles Swindoll, *Fascinating Stories of Forgotten Lives* (Waco, TX: Word Publishing, 2005), p. 189.

³ Fredrick J. Mabie, in Tremper Longman, III & David E. Garland, Eds, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary 4 – 1 Chronicles – Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), p. 62.

⁴ Swindoll, *Fascinating Stories of Forgotten Lives*, p. 193.

The simple answer is that he prayed, believed, and lived a life of obedience to God's will. Prayer is often neglected because it is hard to do. It forces us to really believe that someone is listening to us.

Unlike the word of faith preachers, the name-it claim-it guys, I don't believe God is going to make us all wealthy.

- The parable of the talents (bags of gold) reveals that God gives each of us different gifts and capacities.
- God has a great but different plan for our lives, but it may not be what we want. 'Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails (Pro 19:21 NIV).'
- Character is more important than wealth or influence. Success reveals character, humility precedes blessing. Success or wealth might crush some people.

Jabez' prayer teaches us that it is okay to ask boldly. Jabez prayed for four things:

1. Blessing - 'Oh, that you would bless me.'

- He asks for overwhelming blessings, that the humble beginnings of his life and the limitations of his name would be forgotten; that his future would be a contrast to his past.
- This prayer is for a closer relationship with God. Just like Israel had a special relationship with God, so Jabez is crying out for the blessings that come from relationship.
- Just like my two girls have access to what I own, Jabez asks for a closeness to God and the blessings that go with that relationship.

2. Expansion - 'And expand my territory!'

- This sounds like a 'gimme' list. In the ancient near east context, Jabez is asking for riches and power.
- This is uncomfortable for us today, because it is far different from Jesus' teaching to ask for our 'daily bread (Mt 6:11).'
- Remember that Jabez 'was honorable,' which means he had good motives for asking this and good character to use his wealth and influence in a way that honored God.
- James wrote, 'When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures (Ja 4:3 NIV).'

3. Empowerment - 'Please be with me in all that I do.'

- What a bold prayer – be with me in everything.
- God has plans and purposes far above our understanding. He works all things out ‘in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ep 1:11 NIV).’ God has a wonderful plan for your life, if you will but humble yourself. God lifts the lowly (Ja 4:10, 1Pe 5:6). Jabez started as a nobody and became a somebody – but he never changed his name – he remained ‘pain.’
- I once was on the phone with a pastor I really admired – church of 5,000, a million a year to missions, an Executive Presbyterian. He knew everyone’s name in his church. I stumbled over my words and then apologized. He asked what was wrong. I said I was a bit intimidated talking with him. His response revealed his heart: ‘he got a little weepy and said, ‘I am sorry if I projected anything of superiority. Let’s start our relationship over.’ Instantly, I was talking to farm kid not the great pastor I imagined. Success reveals character, humility precedes blessing.
- Again, these prayers make us uncomfortable because it says in the NT: ‘In humility value others above yourselves, ⁴not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others (Phil 2:3-4 NIV).’

4. Protection – ‘And keep me from all trouble and pain!’

- This is a prayer to break free of his name. He was limited by his name, he wanted to be free of its expectations. ‘Don’t let my name be a self-fulfilling prophecy.’
- Did you start life with few opportunities and a lot of limitations? Look at Jabez’ example.

4. God Answers Prayer.

The final line of this epitaph is that ‘And God granted him his request (1Chr 4:10 NLT).’

- God always answers prayer with a ‘no,’ or ‘not now,’ but sometimes He says ‘yes.’ Yes, if it fits with His plan.
- God is not a big Santa Clause in the sky handing out presents, but he does listen to the desires of his children.
- Jabez did not instantly become wealthy or influential. He humbled himself before God and walked in obedience. Over time Jabez grew in favor.
- Every time God blessed me it followed a time of suffering and obedience; it was as if God wanted to beat every ounce of pride out of my heart. At the same time each of those trials prepared me for the next step.

Conclusion.

Jesus told the story of a man who needed food to feed some friends who dropped in unexpectedly. He had no food, so he went to another friend's home to ask for food. This friend did not want to get up, he was in bed.

This is Jesus' point about prayer: 'Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks, receives. Everyone who seeks, finds. And to everyone who knocks, the door will be opened (Lk 11:9-10 NIV).'

What would you really like to ask of Jesus?

Why does God bless? Because we are His children and He loves us, it brings Him pleasure and glory.

Currently, we are going to have people pray God's blessings over you.

Perhaps you are not on speaking terms with God right now. Come on down and they will help you connect with God.