

The prayer of Jabez

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, "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!" So God granted him what he requested (1 Chron. 4:10, NKJV).

This is the prayer made famous by Bruce Wilkinson in *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life*, which at over 4 million copies sold may become the number one hardcover bestseller for 2001. Tape the prayer to your bathroom mirror so you can see it while you shave. Carry the little book with you and give copies to your friends, but above all, says Wilkinson, pray this little prayer every day and you will tap into the abundance of blessings God keeps in store for you. God was only waiting for you to ask.

Predictably, the reaction has been mixed. As testimonials pour in from people whose lives were turned around by the Jabez prayer, disgruntled comments pile up from those who see in this phenomenon yet another brand of "name it and claim it" spiritual hucksterism.

It would be easy to dismiss *The Prayer of Jabez* if its claims were crassly commercial. But Wilkinson is no Reverend Ike. Almost all the success stories in his book and on the [prayerofjabez.com](#) Web site have to do with being empowered to save lives and win souls. Often these stories are quite moving. The book is a curious blend of Pauline boasting in weakness ("we are expected to attempt something large enough that failure is guaranteed . . . unless God steps in") and sales conference boosterism ("Specifically, we were asking the Lord for 30 decisions for salvation *by the end of the first day*").

How one views *The Prayer of Jabez* may depend on what one understands by "blessing." Ordinary Jews and Christians have always prayed for material as well as spiritual blessings, and Jewish tradition in particular sees nothing wrong with demanding that God deliver the blessings he has promised. The Hebrew word for "to

bless," *brk*, suggests a numinous power possessed by God, who dispenses it either directly or through intermediaries like priests and kings. While God is the maker of all blessing, human beings have what Muslims call the privilege of vice-regency, in that we may bless God and bless one another as well. In the wonderful economy of blessings received and exchanged, the relationship of mutual trust has a fiduciary aspect: Lord, if I bless your name, will you not bless me? If I sacrifice to you, will you not increase my flocks? Is not the Lord a good husbandman? If we ask for bread, will he give us a stone?

Do we want to cut ourselves off from this rich legacy of petitionary prayer, or are we willing to face the problems of discernment it creates? What mother has not sat by her child's bed and prayed for a downpour of blessings? This kind of petitionary prayer should not give us pause. But when Wilkinson asks, "When was the last time God worked through you in such a way that you knew beyond doubt God had done it?" I feel troubled. It is a holy desire to wish to be God's pencil, as Mother Teresa used to say, but to be certain of it is risky. The great men and women of faith make a habit of doubting themselves, and every seasoned doctor of souls views extraordinary claims with suspicion, not because such things are impossible but because the danger of self-deception is so real.

We can see these questions in a new light if we examine the context of the prayer of Jabez. The key may lie in the verse that precedes it. Here, in the midst of a genealogy that leads from Adam to the 12 tribes of Israel and culminates in the reigns of David and Solomon, an unnamed mother bestows upon her son a name that is a pun on the Hebrew word for pain:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez [*y'btz*], saying, "Because I bore him in pain [*b'tzb*]." Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, "Oh that thou wouldst bless me and enlarge my border, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm so that it might not hurt me [*'tzby*]!" And God granted what he asked (1 Chron. 4:9-10).

In naming him Jabez (rather than Jazeb), his mother inverts the word for pain, possibly to ward off the evil effects of a difficult birth. But there is a theological message as well, for the wordplay brings to mind that fateful message to Eve: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children"

(Gen. 3:16). Ever since, history has been one long contest between blessing and curse. Who better to ask God to renew his original blessing than the honorable man whose name recalls Eve's curse?

One toad prays for a juicy grub; another toad prays for a princess to kiss him back into a king. Although we ought to pray like the second toad, it is not wrong to pray like the first, provided we remember that our deepest wish is not to be fattened but to be transformed. The real breakthrough to a blessed life will come when we look beyond the good things our nature teaches us to like to the gracious thing our nature teaches us to reject: the cross. May the territory of *The Prayer of Jabez* expand if it can help us to realize this.