
—Reviewed by Bryan Pollock

“Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’ Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, ‘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.’ And God granted his request.” (1 Chronicles 4:9-10)

Big things often come in small packages. But the slender volume on the one-sentence prayer of an obscure member of the tribe of Judah currently captivating the nation, is thin not only in size but substance.

The Prayer of Jabez, based on the text of I Chronicles 4:9,10, indulges in all of the popular new-evangelical nostrums while turning biblical hermeneutics on its head. It is for starters dangerously reductionistic in its approach. The author blatantly suggests in rhetoric reminiscent of the hype of a used-car salesman, or the “can-do” cant of a motivational pitch man that “through a simple, believing prayer, you can change your future. You can change what happens one minute from now” (p. 29). In this popular approach to Christianity that reduces the faith down to the mere application of principles, sinful man, prideful man, capable man becomes the measure of success. He can do it! And all he has to do is to learn the secrets of success and apply them accordingly. This is the kind of Christianity that even unbelievers may practice with impunity!

Man stands too tall in the author’s esteem, as a result, and God assumes a frighteningly reduced dimension. He is reduced to the “watching and waiting” God of popular evangelicalism. Who is virtually powerless until man makes the first and right move. On page 60, Wilkinson writes, “...God is watching and waiting for you to ask for the supernatural power He offers.” After quoting 2 Chronicles 16:9 to “prove” this passive divine posture, the author then states, “He eagerly seeks those who are loyal to Him. Your loyal heart is the only part of His expansion plan that He will not provide.” But how can I provide loyalty to God when the Bible explicitly says that such loyalty is a human impossibility and must come to me by grace? Indeed if God waits for my loyalty, He waits for a “morning cloud” and for the “dew which goes away early” (Hos. 6:4). God Himself must storm the heart of the soul He determines to make strong for Himself and bestow upon it the grace of loyalty and prayerful dependence (Prov. 21:1; Zech. 12:10).

Just how far the author goes in his reductionistic theology becomes painfully obvious on page 49. Wilkinson talks like a process theologian when he states that God “becomes great” through the person who surrenders his need to the Lord! And when theology goes out the window, so does a proper understanding of man’s relationship to the Almighty. One wonders why any one would want to pray to such a God once authors like Mr. Wilkinson are done with Him. Perhaps this is why they must resort to someone else’s prayer uttered in a time and setting when men really knew Him and walked with Him!
The author also gives us within the pages of *The Prayer of Jabez* a dose of the self-esteem gospel! According to Mr. Wilkinson, Jabez’s real problem wasn’t his sin nature inherited from Adam—a truth glaringly absent from the book—even though a mere three chapters earlier in 1 Chronicles, the very genealogy in which we later find the subject of this book begins with Adam (1 Chr. 1:1)! No, Jabez’s real problem, according to the author, is traced to a “curve ball” thrown by his mother when she saddled him with a bad name. The name Jabez means, “He causes pain,” undoubtedly a not-so-pleasant reminder of the mother’s birth experience. As the author himself puts it, “He (Jabez) grew up with a name any boy would love to hate. Imagine if you had to go through childhood enduring the teasing of bullies, the daily reminders of your unwelcome arrival, and mocking questions like, ‘So, young man, what was your mother thinking?’” (p. 21).

This not only drips with self-esteem theology, it is drenched with a faulty hermeneutic. The author clearly reads back from our own time and setting into a 3,500 year old context, and clothes Jabez in the thin-skinned mantle of a contemporary, milquetoast, American adolescent. But men, even young men, in Jabez’s day were made of sterner stuff! And, worst of all, it fails once again to deal with the most pressing of issues, the issue of human sin that could have been accomplished by linking the pain of Jabez’s birth to the curse of the fall (Gen. 3:16).

Hermeneutical deficiencies are elsewhere apparent in this book, most notably in the violence the author’s interpretive approach does to the principle of proportion. This sadly neglected principle represents that great bastion of restraint against building interpretive castles on a foundation of thin air. It is summed up in a simple question: Just how much ink did the Holy Spirit deem necessary for the human authors of the Scriptures to spill on any given topic? Those topics concerning which the Word is silent or virtually so, must not be turned into grist for a doctrine mill, because in doing so, the interpreter must indulge in a potentially dangerous eisegesis, or a “reading between the lines” of the text due to the sheer paucity of evidence. This leads to hermeneutical license, and, in the words of one of my seminary professors, runs the risk of turning the Word of God into a “ventriloquist’s dummy.” Wilkinson verges breathlessly close to this practice on page 20 of his book: “Perhaps the baby was born breech,” he writes. “Or perhaps the mother’s pain was emotional—maybe the child’s father abandoned her during pregnancy; maybe he had died; maybe the family had fallen into such financial straits that the prospect of another mouth to feed brought only fear and worry” (p. 20; emphasis mine). Not only is the author reading speculatively between the lines of the text, but he does so utterly heedless of clear biblical teaching elsewhere (i.e., Deut. 15:1-6; Psalms 127 and 128). That invalidates every one of these theories!

But perhaps Wilkinson’s gravest error is his appeal to pragmatic and subjective arguments to defend his thesis. “How do I know that it [his book] will significantly impact you?” Wilkinson asks rhetorically. “Because of *my experience* (emphasis mine) and the testimony of hundreds of others around the world with whom I’ve shared these principles” (p. 11). There is no appeal to the objective validity of the Scriptural witness, only to the experience of Wilkinson and others who’ve applied the requisite principles. I should not have to emphasize how fraught with potential danger this kind of subjective hermeneutic can be.
Though the author bobs and weaves his way through much of his book trying to distance himself from any appearance of a “health and wealth” gospel, in the end his disclaimers pack little punch. His own interpretive method and reductionistic theology have no muscle to deliver the author from these charges. In the end, he is doomed by his own appeal to popularity which renders any serious theological discussion of the prayer of Jabez nigh unto impossible. What he ends serving up to the increasingly unthinking and credulous masses of popular evangelicalism is more of the same spiritual “junk food” that increasingly causes the true God and His true Word (when correctly explained) to leave a bitter aftertaste on the popular palate. Is it any wonder why serious theological discourse in this nation is on the wane when a very thin book with a very thin veneer of theology resonates so tellingly in the popular conscience?