

**Shawnee Presbyterian Church**  
**August 30, 2020**  
**Rev. Thomas Bartha**  
**“A Life Altering Prayer”**

I Chronicles 4:5-10                      "A Life-Altering Prayer"

Part of me is hesitant to ask, but how many were thrilled with this Old Testament reading? "Oh boy, a list of names! Finally I am going to learn about Koz and A-huz-zum. It is about time pastor preached on Ha-a-hash-ta-ri." Well, spotlight falls upon Jabez. He lived roughly 1400 years before Jesus. His name is inserted abruptly in this passage, then never mentioned again. So, why Jabez?

In summer of 1996, I attended a preaching conference, and Cliff Barrows preached on this passage. Cliff Barrows was one of Billy Graham's closest companions for decades. He was among the five men who were aboard with Billy Graham from his very first crusade. A legend, and a humble, genuine servant of Christ. When I listened to Cliff Barrows preach on I Chronicles 25 years ago, Jabez jumped off the page and into my soul, where he has stirred around for all these years. A remarkable prayer.

In year 2000 the book came out, The Prayer of Jabez, by Bruce Wilkinson. Subtitle, "Breaking Through to the Blessed Life." It was the big rage for awhile, but I delayed reading it. When I finally did read it, and began praying the prayer which we will pursue in these next 20 minutes, it genuinely re-directed my life. This passage of scripture played a major role in leading our family from Michigan to New Jersey in summer of 2002. It is a daring prayer for anyone interested in reaching out for an extraordinary life. A dangerous prayer, for God may do some wonderfully upsetting things. So, a brief word about the man himself, then his remarkable life-rearranging prayer.

Amid this litany of names in First Chronicles: Zoreth, Anub, Tekoa, Etum, Jabez is singled out as being more honorable than his brothers. Honored, in the sense that he asked of God. How many prayers go unmet purely because we do not bring them before God? We are told that his name means, "pain." "I bore him in pain--Jabez." Old Testament names were often associated with birth. We have "Esau, "hairy," or Jacob--"he grasps the heel." Imagine if our names we were named based upon the rigors of childbirth. We would have, "Ugh," and "Uumph," and "Yowza."

But it is Jabez' prayer that deserves our keen focus: Jabez called upon the God of Israel, saying, "**Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!**" Four requests.

One: "**Oh that you would bless me.**" Do you ever pray that? We often ask God to bless others--family, friends, those traveling or experiencing difficult times. Years back I learned of a child's bedtime prayer. Each night: "Bless Mommy and Daddy and Grandma and Jimmy and the dog, and bless God. Amen." It seemed so right, that the child's mother began adding it to her own prayer: "Bless YOU, God."

Jabez' prayer is bless me. Nothing selfish about that. The biblical sense is, "Oh that you would bless me...spiritually." When we seek God's blessing as the ultimate value in life, we are throwing ourselves into the river of God's will and power and purposes for us. Everything else is secondary.

Two words come to mind: conviction and contentment. "Lord, I pray that you would bless me with conviction in my calling as a disciple of Jesus Christ." Whether up front or behind the scenes, we live with the conviction that what we are doing is offered up to the Lord, and making a difference for Jesus' sake.

You may be investing yourself in absolute obscurity, but your kingdom contribution makes it that much easier for another to embrace or follow Jesus. Construction began on the Statue of Liberty in 1875, long before airplanes. But the top of the Statue of Liberty is sculpted with precision and beauty--the sculptor's conviction that this work was deserving of his finest efforts, even the parts no one would see.

To pray in the manner of Jabez would be to say, "Bless me, Lord, to live in deeper obedience, sacrificially, open and available to you. I hunger to walk more closely with Christ. Bless me..."

"Bless me also with a spiritual contentment." Not laziness, nor ease. Spiritual contentment is the sense that God has you in a particular place or arena of service at this time, for a purpose. There will always be bigger or lesser endeavors. "God, bless me with a fresh contentment in this area where I serve; this is where you would have me at this time, and I shall give You my best." Guard against becoming a wheelbarrow Christian. Do you know what that is? One who has to be pushed, and is easily upset. There are plenty of those!

God's nature is to give and bless abundantly. "Oh that you would bless me..."

Second request: "Bless me, and **enlarge my territory, expand my borders.**" Jabez may well have been praying for more property, but scripture says he was honorable, so add the spiritual dimension: "Lord, enlarge my faith territory, expand my capacity to be yielded to you. Show me fresh ways to serve in your name." Songwriter Ken Medema sang, "Will you stay where you are, or reach for a star?"

What if you or I were to pray, "O God, please expand my opportunities and impact in such a way that I, that our church, touch more lives for Jesus' sake, and for your glory. Let us do more for you!"

Keep reaching, stretching, growing. If you enlarge a photograph, new things come into view that you may have missed before. When we ask God to spiritually expand us, new horizons come into focus. As Rev. Darcy and Jil Hawk begin their ministry here, this will be a vital prayer—for a fresh breath of Holy Spirit-guided potential for Shawnee Church. This church has such a rich history, and a hunger to impact lives for Jesus' sake. Like many other churches, Shawnee has grown smaller. But lives are still impacted one at a time, and we have a vital role in this community.

Keep thinking and dreaming and praying for new avenues of mission and outreach and worship. Aim at nothing, and you are bound to hit it.

I plan to be faithful in praying, "Lord, enlarge our territory, expand our border, the lives we touch for Jesus.

Jabez' third request: "**And that your hand might be with me.**" You have been riding in a car before that comes to a sudden stop. Often the driver will instinctively put out a hand, to protect. In Isaiah 41:10, God says, "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*" Even in the darkest moments which are allowed into our lives, God never withdraws his hand.

In asking God to bless and expand his borders, Jabez is now asking God's sustaining hand, to guide. "Oh God, I need you more than ever. Let your hand be with me." The touch of greatness.

Final petition: "**Keep me from hurt and harm.**" At first glance this seems unrealistic. Life holds pain and turmoil for any of us. Yet, Jabez' prayer could also be viewed from this angle: "Keep me from evil. Guard me from an attitude of casualness toward you, or taking you for granted. Keep me from carelessness in faith, from callousness toward others, from compromising the standards you call us to live."

If you pray Jabez' prayer, and God begins to work through you in new ways, this draws the Evil One's attention. You are encroaching upon his territory--of preventing people from becoming excited or reinvested in Jesus. He will put out new temptations to trip you up, set you back, lessen your influence: pride, over-indulgence, spiritual detours...

If you have ever watched a toddler taking first steps, or a child learning to ride a bicycle, they will sometimes brush away a hand offered to them. "No, I am determined to do this myself!" It is part of growing up. We can brush God's guiding hand aside, but God is more persistent in his caring than we are in our rebellion. When we fall, God will help us onto our feet, over and again. So, to pray, "keep me from hurt and harm," we may want to rephrase: "Lord, keep me from carelessness, casualness, callousness, and compromise. Protect me, Holy God, by your power." It is a prayer of dependence, and deliverance from evil, and the harm that evil brings.

**"And God granted what Jabez asked."** We serve a prayer-answering God, who receives our requests, and responds in divine wisdom. There are things we do not receive, chiefly because we do not ask. When I began praying the prayer of Jabez in earnest years back, God graciously provided new challenges, and fresh opportunities to serve and worship and grow. I am so grateful to have rediscovered this prayer. I have dusted it off, and plan on reclaiming God's wisdom and guidance in this prayer. I pray you would do this same. A fresh Shawnee chapter now begins with the Hawks' arrival. Uphold them, and ask God to accomplish mighty things through us, both as individuals, and as a community of believers, the body of Christ. All for the glory of God's Son, Jesus. Amen.

Gracious God, let this prayer of Jabez take root in our souls and grow. We lift Darcy and Jil Hawk as they begin their time here, and pray that you will accomplish more through our combined efforts than we ever dreamt possible. You are the God of grace and fresh starts and renewed vigor, and we lift our prayer to you in the strong name of your wonderful Son, Jesus our Savior. Amen.