

Sermon XIV

"Jabez"

A New Year's Day Sermon

by

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"And Jabez was more honorable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him with sorrow.' And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, 'Oh that thou would bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested." (1 Chronicles 4:9,10)

If we had to fix on a portion of Scripture which might be removed from our Bibles without being much missed, we should probably select the first nine chapters of this First Book of Chronicles--a mere record of names, a catalog of genealogies. The eye glances rapidly over them, and we are inclined to hasten on to parts which may present something more interesting and instructive. Yet what a startling, what an impressive thing should a record of names be, a catalog of genealogies! The chapters deserve the closest attention, even if you keep out of sight their bearing on the descent and parentage of the Christ.

It is a New Year's day sermon, this long list of fathers and their children. What are all these names which fill page after page? They are the names of people who were once as warm with life as us; who moved upon earth as we move now; who had their joys, their sorrows, their hopes, their fears, their projects. They are the names of those who once lived, nay, who still live; and this is perhaps even the harder to realize of the two. The dead are not dead; they have but changed their place of sojourn.

We have all heard of the dissolute [profligate] man who is said to have been converted through hearing the fifth chapter of the Book of Genesis. It is there that mention is made of the long lives of Adam, Seth, Enos, Methuselah, and others; and each notice is concluded with the words "and he died." It came appallingly home to him that the most protracted life

must end at last in death. He could not get rid of the fact that life had to terminate, and he found no peace till he had provided that it might terminate well.

But suppose each notice had been concluded, as it might have been, with the words "and he lives." Would there not have been much more to startle and seize upon the dissolute man? "He died" does not necessarily involve a state of retribution. "He lives" crowds the future with images of judgment and recompense. Names of the dead and yet names of the living. Their mere enumeration should suggest the thought of our days upon earth as being not merely short but as being days of probation for an everlasting existence as well!

To read these chapters of the Chronicles is like entering a vast cemetery where the dead of many generations sleep. And a cemetery is a good place for a New Year's day meditation, seeing that we have just consigned the old year--with its joys, sorrows, plans, events, mercies, and sins--to the grave. But are the multitudes whose names we see inscribed on the stones dead? No. Their dust indeed is beneath our feet; but even that dust shall live again. And their spirits--conscious still--occupy some unknown region either in misery or happiness, and reserved for either yet more wretchedness or gladness at an approaching resurrection and general judgment.

And neither is the past year dead. There is not a moment of it but lives and breathes, exercising some measure of influence over our actual condition; and reserved to exercise a yet stronger influence when it shall come forth as a witness at the last dread assize [judgment]. There the past year will bear testimony which must help determine whether we are to be forever with the Lord or banished forever from the light of his presence. There is no burying of the past as though it were never to revive.

We should receive, however, a wrong impression in regard to these chapters in First Chronicles if we were to suppose them valuable only on such account as has been mentioned; for interspersed with the names are, here and there, brief but pregnant notices of persons and things. It is as if they were inserted to reward the diligent student, who, rather than taking for granted that a catalog of names could not be worth reading, should go through it with extreme care, fearing to miss some word of information or admonition. Our text is a remarkable case in point.

We know nothing whatsoever of the Jabez here commemorated, beyond what we find in these two verses. But this is enough to make him worthy,

in no ordinary degree, of being admired and imitated. There is a depth and a comprehensiveness in the registered prayer of this unknown individual that should suffice to make him a teacher of the righteous in every generation. And if we wanted a prayer especially suited to New Year's day, where could we find more appropriate utterances? Let us now take the several parts of the text in succession and search out the lessons which may be useful to ourselves.

We do not know the particular reasons that influenced the mother of Jabez to call him by that name, a name which means *sorrowful*. We are merely told, "*His mother called his name Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him with sorrow.'*" Whether it were that she brought forth this son with more than common anguish, or whether, as it may have been, that the time of his birth was the time of her widowhood so that the child came and found no father to welcome him, the mother evidently felt but little of a mother's joy and looked on her infant with forebodings and fears.

But it was, perhaps, not her own bodily suffering that made her fasten on the boy a dark and gloomy name, for with the danger of giving birth now passed she would rather have given a name commemorative of deliverance, remembering "no more her anguish for joy that a man was born into the world." Indeed, when Rachel bore Benjamin she called his name Benoni, that is, the son of my sorrow, for in his birth "her soul was in departing, for she died." And when there pressed upon a woman in her travail heavier things than her bodily pains--as with the wife of Phinehas, to whom were brought the sad tidings that the ark of God was taken and her father-in-law and husband were dead--the mind could fix on the more fatal facts and perpetuate their remembrance through naming the child Ichabod, saying, "The glory is departed from Israel, for the ark of God is taken."

We may well, therefore, suppose that the mother of Jabez had deeper and more lasting sorrows to register in the name of her boy than those involved in giving birth. And whatever may have been the cause, we may consider the woman as having bent in bitterness over her newborn child, having only tears to give him as his welcome to the world, and feeling it impossible to associate with him even a hope of happiness. She had probably looked with different sentiments on her other children. She had clasped them to her breast with all a mother's gladness, and gazed upon them in the fond anticipation of their proving the supports and comforts of her own declining years. But with Jabez it was all gloom. The mother felt as if she could never be happy again. This boy brought nothing but added care, anxiety, and grief; and if she must give him a name, let it be one which may always

remind him and others of the dark heritage to which he had been born.

And yet the history of the family is gathered into the brief sentence, "*Jabez was more honorable than his brethren.*" The child of sorrow outstripped all the others in those things which are "acceptable to God and approved of men." Nothing is told us of his brethren except that they were less honorable than he. They too may have been excellent, and perhaps as much is implied, but Jabez took the lead and surpassed every other in piety and renown. Oh, if the mother lived to see the manhood of her sons, how strangely must the name Jabez have sounded in her ear! The child of sorrow was all that the most affectionate parent could wish for, and more than the most aspiring parent could have hoped. He may have seemed to her as a standing memorial of her lack of confidence in God and of the falseness of human calculations.

And is not this brief notice of the mother of Jabez full of warning and admonition to ourselves? How ready we are to give the name "Jabez" to persons or things. "All these things," said the patriarch Jacob, "are against me." The loss of Joseph, the binding of Simeon, the sending away of Benjamin--upon these he would have written "Jabez." And yet, as you all know, it was by and through these gloomy dealings that a merciful God was providing for the sustenance of the patriarch and his household. That which Jacob called "Jabez" was God's minister for good.

Thus it continually happens in regard to us. We give the sorrowful title to that which is designed for the beneficent end. We judge only by present appearances, allowing our fears and feelings rather than our faith to estimate and rank the character of occurrences. Sickness? We call it "Jabez," though it may be sent to minister to our spiritual health. Poverty? We call it "Jabez," though it comes to help us in possessing the heavenly riches. Bereavement? We call it "Jabez," though it is designed to graft us more closely into the household of God.

Here is a lesson we can derive from this concise but striking narrative in the first verse of our text: Let us neither look confidently on what promises best, nor despairingly on what wears the most threatening appearance. God often wraps up the withered leaf of disappointment in the bright purple bud, and as often enfolds the golden flower of enjoyment in the nipped and blighted shoot. Let us wait meekly upon the Lord, never cherishing a wish that we might choose for ourselves, and never doubting that God orders all for our good. Oh, be careful that you do not speak harshly of his dealings, and that you do not provoke him by speaking as though you could see

through his purpose and thereby decide that it is one of unmixed calamity. If you are so ready with your gloomy names, he may suspend his gracious designs.

But let us now turn to the prayer of Jabez, and let us examine first to whom it is addressed. It is not stated that Jabez called on God, but that he called on "*the God of Israel.*" Unimportant as this may seem upon a cursory glance, it will be found full of beauty and interest.

There are few things more significant than the difference in the manner in which God is addressed by saints under the old and under the new dispensation. Patriarchs pray to God as the God of their fathers; apostles pray to him as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In both forms there is an intimation of the same fact--that we need something to encourage us in approaching God; that, exposed as we are to his just wrath for our sins, we can have no confidence in speaking to him as to absolute Deity.

Under the earlier dispensations, when the mediatorial office of Christ was but imperfectly made known, men had to seize on other pleas and encouragements; and then it was a great thing that they could address God as the God of Israel, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. The title assured them that God was ready to hear prayer and to answer it. They went before God, thronged as it were with remembrances of mercies bestowed, deliverances granted, evils averted. How could they be fearful that God was too great to be addressed, too occupied to reply, or too stern to show kindness when they bore in mind how he had shielded their parents, hearkened to their cry, and proved himself "a very present help" in times of trouble?

We too must have some title with which to address God; and it should be a title which will not interfere with his majesty or his mysteriousness, but yet may place God under a character which shall give hope to the sinful as they prostrate themselves before him. And though the great character under which God should be addressed by us under the new dispensation is "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," there is no need for us to altogether drop the title "the God of our fathers." It might often do much to cheer a sorrowful heart and encourage a timid suppliant to say, "the God in whom my parents trusted," "the God who heard my parent's cries," "the God who supplied my parent's needs."

Oh, there is many a poor wanderer who would be more encouraged and more admonished through such a remembrance of God as this. There are

some here whose mothers looked on them hopefully, with eyes brimming with gladness. But these children have sorely wrung the hearts of their parents by being disobedient, dissipated, and (that thing which is sharper than a serpent's tooth) thankless. There are some such here, some who helped bring down a father's "grey hairs with sorrow to the grave." There are others whose parents still survive, but if you could look in unexpectedly on those parents, you might find them shedding scalding tears on account of a child who is to them a Jabez, one causing only grief, whatever brighter name he was given amid the hopes and promises of baptism. We speak to those of you whose consciences bear witness that your parents would have predicted nothing but the truth had they named you Jabez. Begin this new year with resolutions of amendment and vows of better things.

And what did Jabez pray for? Great things. Great if you suppose him to have spoken only as an heir of the temporal Canaan, but greater if you ascribe to him acquaintance with the mercies of redemption. "*Oh, that thou would bless me indeed!*" Lay the emphasis on that word *indeed*. Many things pass for blessings which are not, and many more that are, we deny. There is a blessing in appearance which is not one in reality, and the reality may exist where the appearance is lacking. The man in prosperity appears to have a blessing whereas the man in adversity appears to be without it. Yet how often does God bless by withholding and withdrawing? More frequently, it may be, than by giving and continuing. Therefore, let me be denied that blessing which appears to be one but is not; and let me have that blessing which appears not to be one but is. Let it come under any form--disappointment, tribulation, persecution--but "bless me indeed." Bless me, though it be with the rod. Deal with me as Thou will, with the blow or with the balm. Only bless me indeed!

Jabez continues, "*That thou would enlarge my coast.*" He probably speaks as one who had to win his portion of the promised land from the enemy, not that he was desirous of securing for himself a broader inheritance. He may have been jealous for God, seeing the idolater defile what God had set apart for his people. And a Christian may use the same prayer. He too has to ask that his coast may be enlarged. Who among us has yet taken possession of one-half the territory assigned him by God? Of course we are not speaking of the inheritance which is above, but of that present inheritance which is ours in virtue of adoption into the family of God. Much of that inheritance we allow to remain unpossessed through deficiency in diligence or faith. What districts of unpossessed territory are there in the Bible! How much of that blessed book has been comparatively unexamined by us! How little practical use do we make of God's promises! How slow is

our progress in that humbleness of mind, strength of faith, and holiness of life which are as much a present reward as an evidence of fitness for the society of heaven!

It is a holy ambition that pants for an enlarged territory. But are we only to pray for it? Are we not also to struggle for the enlargement of our coasts? Indeed we are. Observe how Jabez proceeds: "*And that thine hand might be with me.*" He represents himself as arming for the struggle but knowing that all the while "the battle is the Lord's." Let it be thus with ourselves. We will pray that during the coming year our coasts may be enlarged. Oh for more of those deep havens where the soul may anchor in still waters of comfort! Oh for a longer stretch of those sunny shores whereon the tree of life grows and where angel visitors seem often to alight!

But enlargement comes when we give ourselves to a closer study of the word, to a more diligent use of the ordinances of the Church, and to a harder struggle with the flesh. Only let us do all with the practical consciousness that "except the Lord build the house, their labor is but lost that built it." This will be to arm ourselves for the war, like Jabez; but like Jabez, to expect success only so far as God's hand shall be with us.

There is one more petition in the prayer of him who, named with a dark and inauspicious name, grew to be more honorable than his brethren--"*that thou would keep me from evil that it may not grieve me.*" It is not a plea for actual exemption from evil. It is no pious wish to have no evil whatsoever in our portion: "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" There is a vast difference between being visited by evil and grieved by evil. He is grieved by evil who does not receive it meekly and submissively as the chastisement of his heavenly Father. He is grieved by evil who receives it as an injury rather than a benefit, which latter is always God's purpose in its permission or appointment. He is grieved by evil who allows it to drive him into sin, and to whom, therefore, it furnishes cause of bitter repentance.

You see, then, that Jabez showed great spiritual discernment in casting his prayer into this particular form. We too should pray, not absolutely that God would keep us from evil, but that he would so keep it from us, or us from it, that it may not grieve us. The coming year can hardly fail to bring with it its portion of trouble. There are individuals here who will have much to endure, whether in person or family or substance. It is scarcely assuming the place of the prophet if I say that I see the funeral procession moving from some of your doors, and sorrow breaking like an armed man

into many of your households. But if it were too much to hope that evil may not come, it is not too much to pray that evil may not grieve.

Ah, if we knew approaching events, we should perhaps be ready to give the name Jabez to the year which has this day been born. And yet may this Jabez be more honorable than his brethren--a year of enlargement of our coasts, of greater acquisition in spiritual things, of growth in grace, of closer conformity to the image of Christ. Let us strive to cultivate a submissiveness of spirit, a firm confidence in the wisdom and goodness of the Lord, and a disposition to count nothing really injurious but that which injures the soul; yea, to count everything profitable from which the soul may gain good. And all this may be encompassed in that simple, comprehensive petition, "*Oh that thou would keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me.*"

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Note: This sermon has been condensed, and liberty has been taken for some light editing. Also, punctuation and KJV-era verb forms have been modernized, and long paragraphs have been divided.