

The Covenant Request of the Honorable Jabez

“And Jabez was more honorable than his brethren: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, Because I bare him with sorrow.

“And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, Oh that thou wouldest bless me indeed, and enlarge my coast, and that thine hand might be with me, and that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me! And God granted him that which he requested.”

— 1 Chronicles 4:9–10

Introduction

In this passage, almost hidden in the genealogies, Scripture presents to the church, particularly the youth of the church, the honorable Jabez.

All that we know of him is what we read in these two verses in 1 Chronicles. The young man is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.

We know that he belonged to the tribe of Judah, because he appears in the genealogy of Jacob’s son, Judah (v. 1). Judah was the tribe to which God promised the bringing forth of the Messiah for the establishing of his covenant. In this lad the covenant promise worked powerfully, so that Jabez was a worthy member of that honored tribe of Israel.

What little we do know of Jabez is instructive especially for the youth of the covenant. At the time he meets us on the pages of Scripture, Jabez is obviously a young man. He is of that age when the whole of life stretches out before him and when he seriously considers the whole of life for himself—what he desires his life to be. Jabez’ age when we meet him is about the age at which covenant young people make confession of faith in the church today

There is this too about Jabez that specially concerns or ought to concern the youth of the church: Jabez was honorable, according to the word of God. Youth esteems honor. In their contemplation of the life that lies before them, they are determined to be honorable humans, and uppermost among their desires is the desire for honor. The covenant request of Jabez reveals what genuine honor consists of.

Such was his request that every young person who confesses his or her faith from the heart makes the same request of the God of Israel/the church: “Oh that thou wouldst bless me indeed,” and what follows.

I set before the young people in the Protestant Reformed Churches who consider making confession of faith or have already made confession of faith, the honorable Jabez and his covenant request.

Who He Was

We do well to remember that there was something special about Jabez. He was a member of the covenant people of God. His name is included on the lists of the generations of the people of God. His request shows that he was not merely a member formally and outwardly. He was a living member of the covenant people by the Spirit’s work of circumcising his heart.

Today’s Jabez is the young man or young woman who became a member of a true church by baptism, because he or she was sanctified in Christ and was already at baptism a member of the church by eternal election from infancy.

This is honor!

But Jabez was one of the ordinary members of this special people. There were exceptional members—the officebearers; those who performed heroic deeds; those who stood out because of a notable child or grandchild. They were on the foreground of the history of the Old Testament church. Jabez was not among them. You do not find Jabez in Hebrews 11 as one of the heroes of faith.

There were also ordinary members of the special people of God in the Old Testament. They were in the background. They did not receive special gifts or perform mighty deeds of faith. They were the majority, as is the case in the church also today. Jabez was one of these ordinary members. He comes briefly to public attention here in two verses of 1 Chronicles 4, and then, as if in embarrassment, disappears again forever.

Indeed, there was something positively unpromising about Jabez, as his name brings out. “Jabez” means “sorrow.” This was not a nice name. His mother named him Jabez, “because I bare him with sorrow” (v. 9). Now all children are born with some

sorrow to their mother. This is what God imposed on women as judgment for woman's part in the fall: "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16).

That Jabez' mother named him "Sorrow" because of the pain he caused her in the birth points out that he was an exceptional case. Hers was a very hard pregnancy with Jabez. His entrance into the world was a hard delivery. The delivery may very well have left its mark on Jabez, whether physically or mentally. Jabez was an "uncomely" member of the church, one of the "weak" (1 Cor. 1:26–28).

You would not expect much from Jabez, from the one who caused pain to his mother, from the "Sorrowful One." Indeed, Jabez was not motivated by his mother to expect much of himself.

So often in the church today we look to the few who are prominent and specially gifted. This is not wrong, for God raises up a few for special labor and gives them extraordinary gifts for the welfare of the church—a King David; an apostle Paul; a church father Augustine; a Reformer Luther.

But so easily we suppose that nothing can be hoped for from the ordinary many. They receive the impression that they are shut up to a small spot in God's covenant and a puny portion of God's covenant salvation.

Jabez shows that this is a mistake.

This ordinary church member was honorable.

The honor was spiritual. He was a God-fearing young man. He showed this by praying: "Jabez called on the God of Israel" (v. 10). The young person who is spiritual prays. Jabez could pray because he knew God as the God of the covenant: "God of Israel." He knew this covenant God as almighty, capable of doing all the wonderful things that Jabez requested in his prayer. Jabez depended upon this almighty, covenant God with the trust of faith in him. Jabez made no boast of his own worth. Neither did he declare what he would do for God. He only asked of God to give to him.

Ordinary member of the covenant though he was, Jabez was no spiritual lightweight, but a spiritual heavyweight. "Honorable" in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament has the root meaning of "heavy." Jabez was heavy with the weight of the glory of God's grace in him.

These are the honorable people, as judged by God: those who know him as God of the covenant; those who seek communion with him in prayer; those who seek the blessings of salvation from him as purely gracious gifts.

Not only was Jabez honorable, but he was also more honorable than his brothers (v. 9). There was a distinction in the family between Jabez and his brothers. Jabez was more honorable than those who seemed more promising and from whom, perhaps, their mother expected more than she expected from “Sorrow.”

This distinction could have been absolute. Jabez was honorable; the brothers were dishonorable. The brothers rejected the God of Israel. They despised the covenant. They sold their birthright for a mess of pottage.

Today there are in the same family, among offspring of the same parents, those who confess their faith and then keep their vow—the children of promise—and those who, having made confession of faith, break their vow and forsake the church for the world of the ungodly—children of the flesh. The eternal decree of predestination, election and reprobation, distinguishes between the children of believers.

But the distinction between Jabez and his brothers could have been relative. They were honorable, but Jabez was more honorable. The brothers feared God, but not with the zeal of Jabez. The brothers had regard for the covenant and its sign in their flesh, but for Jabez the covenant was everything. The brothers too sought the blessings of the covenant, but not with Jabez’ ardor.

God’s covenant grace was rich and abundant in the sorrowful one.

There is this distinction among the saints also today. The distinction is not of office, or gifts, or work in the church. But it is of spirituality; of covenant life; of godliness. Some are spiritual lightweights. They show this by contenting themselves with a minimum of the truth, a minimum of sound doctrine, a minimum of attendance at church, a minimum of the covenant blessings of salvation.

Jabez showed himself a spiritual heavyweight by his request of God, by the content of his petitionary prayer.

His Request

In general, the request was spiritual blessings. Even though in the time of the old dispensation, when everything spiritual had an earthly, typical form, these blessings had an earthly appearance, Jabez did not request merely earthly riches and comforts.

The request of Jabez showed his honor, and there is no honor in the natural, fleshly desire to be rich and comfortable.

To dare to appear before God asking for material wealth is shameful behavior.

The blessings Jabez asked of God were spiritual blessings, and they all were blessings of the covenant God established with Abraham and Judah—Jabez' ancestors—and thus with Jabez—their descendant. Every one of the blessings was promised by God to his covenant people.

The covenant blessing for which Jabez prayed was three-fold. First, God would enlarge Jabez' coast, that is, the boundaries of Jabez' portion of the promised land of Canaan. Jabez desired a spacious area in which to enjoy God and his rest. He desired a large territory in which to serve God and praise him.

Those young men and women who make Jabez' request today desire all of the riches of God's truth; the fullest possible enjoyment of the life of a true church; and the privilege of serving God, not as little as possible, but as much as possible. They ask God for sharing in the riches and comfort of Jesus Christ by the Spirit *in abundance*.

The less honorable in the church are willing to lose their territory for some earthly gain. They settle for as little truth, as little preaching, as little holiness, as little of Jesus Christ as permits them still to go to heaven when they die.

The young person who leaves a true church, which preaches the pure, full word of God, for weakened and corrupted preaching, probably for the sake of a wife or a husband, is no Jabez.

Young man, young woman—pray: “Enlarge my coast!”

The second blessing for which Jabez petitioned was that God's hand would be with him. This was the request that God's almighty power uphold, protect, and bless him and all his life in the world. For the hand is the hand of the God of Israel—a hand exercising love towards and doing good to Jabez, a true, living member of the covenant people of Israel.

The one who makes this request trusts in and commits himself and all he has and does to the care of the God of Israel.

This second blessing is also that God governs Jabez' life. God's hand is a ruling, directing, authoritative hand. Jabez was no rebellious, independent, autonomous young man, doing "his own thing."

It is no insignificant aspect of the second blessing that Jabez requested the presence of God himself with him in life. Where is God's *hand*, there is God himself—*with Jabez*. This is the blessing of the covenant above all else: God is with us, and we therefore are with God.

The less honorable young people in the godly family and in the church are content to forget God, to live and work pretty much in their own strength, and even to direct their life according to their own whims and pleasures. Their own hand plays too prominent a role in their life.

Young man, young woman—pray: "That thine hand might be with me."

The third blessing that made up the prayer of Jabez was that God would keep Jabez from evil. It was not that God would keep evil from Jabez, that is, all kinds of earthly evil, as humans esteem evil—sickness, poverty, family problems, and the like. But Jabez desired that God keep him from the evil of *sin*. He willed and prayed that the power of sin might not rule him, that no besetting sin, whether lust or drunkenness or pride, or any other, get mastery over him even in his soul, that he never fall into presumptuous sin.

Jabez knew that the real evil threatening human life is sin.

He knew also that it is sin that causes the worst misery. His reason for the request to be kept from evil was "that it may not grieve me!" Sin separates from God. Sin deprives the child of God of the experience of the covenant. Sin dams up the outpouring of blessings. Sin exposes the sinner to the painful chastisements of God.

The third blessing is the petition of the young person today, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

It is the prayer for Jesus Christ, the Savior *from sin*, and for his salvation from *sin*.

The less honorable young people are concerned more about God's keeping earthly evils from them than they are about his keeping them from the spiritual evil of sin.

Young man, young woman—pray: “Keep me from evil.”

His Joy

“And God granted him that which he requested” (v. 10).

He always does, when the covenant young man or woman requests the spiritual blessings, riches of Christ, fellowship with God, protection and guidance, and holiness that God has promised to his covenant people.

To those who desire the world, God gives the world.

To those who are satisfied with a bare minimum of blessing, God gives the bare minimum.

To those who desire spiritual abundance, God gives abundance.

The life of Jabez, therefore, stretching before him in his youth, would be satisfying and profitable, whereas the life of so many is vanity. And it would end in the enlarged coasts of the new world in the day of Christ, from which evil is banished. For the hand of God with a young person in this life leads him or her unto eternal life.

Granting Jabez that which he requested, God made Jabez joyful. His life would be a joyful life. This is implied in Jabez’ request that God keep him from evil, “so that it may not *grieve* me!” “Grieve,” in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, is the same word as Jabez’ name. Jabez was very much aware of his unhappy name. The sorrowful one prayed that evil might not make him sorrowful. By answering Jabez’ prayer, God made him joyful, with real, lasting joy.

The sorrowful one became the joyful one.

This is our desire for all our children and all the young people of the congregations.

This, young people, desire for yourselves!