

POPULAR, BUT ARE THEY ANY GOOD?

The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life

by Bruce H. Wilkinson

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The Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance

by Bruce H. Wilkinson

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Reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder

Why has a religious tract-like booklet sold 3 to 4 million copies and counting? Why are pastors buying it by the carton and giving it away to their congregations? Until Bruce H. Wilkinson, founder of "Walk Thru the Bible Ministries," wrote *The Prayer of Jabez*, few people had ever heard of Jabez, an obscure character who appears in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, a chapter of fragments which seem to have little or no connection with one another. Yet Wilkinson manages to write a best seller on a man of whom we know nothing beyond what is communicated in these two Bible verses. All we know is that Jabez's life became a contradiction to his name; the son of sorrows having been freed from the pain in life, attained a greater happiness and reputation than his brothers.

Wilkinson has been praying the prayer of Jabez daily since 1972 when he was a senior student at Dallas Theological Seminary. And for years he has given a four point "sermon" of this prayer at conferences:

1. *We should seek God's Blessing.* "When we seek God's blessing as the ultimate value in life, we are throwing ourselves entirely into the river of His will and power and purposes for us." Wilkinson adds, "Let me tell you a guaranteed by-product of sincerely seeking His blessing: Your life will become marked by miracles." And he says, "What counts is knowing who you want to be and asking for it. Through a simple, believing prayer, you can change your future. You can change what happens one minute from now."
2. *We should seek to enlarge our territory.* Jabez wanted more influence, more responsibility, and more opportunity to make a mark for the God of Israel. What does this mean for us? "If you're doing your business God's way, it's not only right to ask for more, but He is waiting for you to ask."
3. *We should depend on the strong hand of God.* When we depend on God and ask for His mighty presence, we will see tremendous results that can be explained only as from the hand of God. For the Christian dependence on God is just another word for power. How do we get this power? "God is watching and waiting for you to ask."
4. *We should flee from evil.* "Do you believe that a supernatural God is going to show up to keep you from evil and protect your spiritual investment? Jabez did believe, and he acted on his belief. Thereafter his life was spared from grief and

pain that evil brings." Through Christ we can live the victorious life – "not in temptation or defeat."

In other words, Wilkerson does not afflict the comfortable or comfort the afflicted. He explains and expands on Jabez's prayer using carefully chosen themes for the encouragement and comfort of the Christians' privatized faith. When I read about the boundless optimism and emphasis on well being and wealth throughout the booklet, I thought of our impoverished friends we met and worked with in the Philippines. Its opening sentence immediately focuses on the immense value of the individual: "This little book you're holding is about what happens when ordinary Christians decide to reach for an extraordinary life – which, as it turns out, is exactly the kind God promises." There is no mention of difficult and time-consuming tasks, such as counseling a troubled couple for years. While Wilkinson was on the island of Patmos as a tourist, he had a brief talk with a man whose marriage was on the rocks. When his cruise ship was about to depart, a young couple came running towards it. When they got close enough to see Wilkinson, they started yelling, "We're together." This is just one of his numerous quick encounters with a happy ending. In short, Wilkerson fast-food spirituality is short on the meaning of perseverance in the midst of trials, persecution, or Christians suffering from prolonged severe illness. His understanding of the Christian faith vastly differs from the early church fathers! Cyprian (ca.200-258), the Bishop of Carthage, wrote to the people of Thibaris a letter exhorting them to martyrdom. "For there comes the time, beloved brethren, which our Lord long ago foretold and taught us was approaching, saying, 'The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service.'"

Secrets of the Vine is an exposition of John 15: 1,2,5,8. Wilkinson reminds Christians of what they can do for the Lord, encouraging them to be innovative and visionary when it comes to helping others. The booklet overflows with exuberant optimism. God seems to be at the beck and call of Christians. Wilkerson says, "The secrets of the vine that I will show you...are our Father's amazing plan to keep His children flourishing - physically, emotionally, and spiritually." For example, he claims that most Christians fail to connect troubling circumstances with God's purposeful intervention because of sin; "sadness, because of the unnecessary pain and turmoil they've endured, sometimes for years." He also claims that God does not apply pain when a more pleasant method would do just as well. Such statements can lead to grave misunderstandings and emotional anguish. If I don't get healed is God continually disciplining me because of some sin? Wilkinson's simplistic and shallow explanation of Scripture leaves much to be desired!

1 Chronicles 4:9,10

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers; and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, 'Because I bore him in pain.' 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!' And God granted what he asked."