

The power of Prayer  
RUMC  
June 22, 2008

I Chronicles is one of the books of the Bible that people like to avoid. I know why. It is because they start reading at the beginning and after about 2 chapters of genealogical lists they get frustrated and move on to another book. Actually the book starts with 8 chapters of begats. Those 8 chapters of genealogical lists serve the purpose of linking the Israelites who entered the Promised Land after 40 years of wondering in the wilderness, with their history. The question was “Is God still interested in us, like he was Abraham?” The answer is “we are the descendents promised to Abraham. Of course God is still interested in us.” It is proven not only in the genealogies, but in the story of God calling and working in David and Solomon.

Anyway, the book opens with 8 chapters of begats. But look. Right in the middle of those 8 chapters; 4 chapters and 9 verses in, the chronicler takes a break. He changes his pattern and tells a little story.

This was kind of like a special report. Ta da da da da da da...

We interrupt you regularly scheduled begats to bring you up to date on a breaking story. Of all the generations listed between Adam and David, Jabez was more honored than all his brothers.”

So if this was important enough to interrupt the Biblical chronology, what can we learn from Jabez?

First, let’s acknowledge that often prayer grows out of pain. We would like to say that we pray just as much when things are going well as when they aren’t going well. But the truth is that we all pray more when things are bad, when we are in pain, when others around us are in pain.

You have to feel sorry for this guy, Jabez. How would you like to go into the first grade with the name Pain?

You are in the first grade and learning to print. Your name goes at the top of the page, right? What kind of a self-image would you get when every page you ever wrote you printed Pain at the top of the page? No wonder this guy grew up needing to pray.

I don't mean to make light of his pain or his mother's pain, but you know it's true don't you? Suffering brings a different depth to our prayer.

Instinctively we know this. We know that the prayers we pray without thinking about them somehow seem less sincere to us. Why shouldn't the same be true for God?

True prayer comes from the depths. It is crying out to God. Crying because of a broken heart, body, mind, life. Crying out in desire for God, crying out in hope for God. Crying out from the depths of our pain.

So the first lesson we get from the prayer of Jabez is that prayer should come from the depths of who we are- it should come from the heart, not just the tongue, it comes from deep, deep, down inside of us.

Second. We have to be bold enough to ask.

Notice the power of asking.

- Not selfish asking;
- not panic asking;
- not memorized asking;
- not duty-bound asking; but,
- Obedient asking with high expectation.

Jesus taught us: "Ask and it will be given you." (Matt. 7:7) Jesus' brother, James, wrote to his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem, "You do not have because you do not ask." (James 4:2)

There is a fable about a Mr. Jones who died and went to heaven. Peter is showing him around the golden streets, the celestial places prepared for us. They come upon an odd-looking, out-of-place building. It looks like an enormous warehouse. It has no windows and only one door. Mr. Jones wants to see inside. Peter hesitates. "You don't really want to see what is in there," he tells the new arrival. Jones is puzzled. Why would there be any secrets in heaven? So after the official tour he asks Peter to see inside the odd-looking building.

Finally Peter relents. Jones almost knocks him down in his hurry to get in and see the building. It turns out that the enormous building is filled with row after row of shelves, floor to ceiling, each stacked neatly with white boxes tied with red ribbons. Then Jones notices that all of the boxes have names on them. Turning to Peter he asks, "Is there a box with my name on it?" Peter nodded affirmatively and said, "But if I were you I wouldn't . . ." but Jones was already racing for the J section. Peter follows, shaking his head.

Peter arrives when Mr. Jones is slipping the red ribbon off his box and popping the lid. Looking inside, Jones has a moment of instant recognition, and he lets out a deep sigh like the ones Peter has heard so many times before. You see, enclosed in the white box are all the blessings that God wanted to give to him while he was on earth . . . but he never asked.

So Jabez asked to be blessed.

Third, Jabez doesn't stop with asking for general blessing. His prayer was not God bless, mommy and daddy and fido and me.

His prayer was very specific Bless me by enlarging my territory.

This is where we have to be careful. I don't know if any of you have read the Book by Bruce Wilkinson entitled The Prayer of Jabez. I think Mr. Wilkinson goes a little too far into prosperity theology- Which in brief is praying "God enlarge my bank account," "God enlarge my garage so I'll have a place to park the Mercedes you want to give me" or "Lord, enlarge our congregation so we will have more money"

On the other hand we can and should as Wilkinson suggests in parts of the book see this as a plea, a petition to God to enlarge the boundaries of our life – our church, our ministry, our vision, our outreach. To stretch us - to make us grow - to use us in new ways. This is a plea to God that fits so many situations.

- Today I think of what many of our members are doing this morning. By going to disaster affected areas they are enlarging the reach of our ministry.
- I think of those who went with me to clean out a flooded basement Friday morning. Even though we didn't get to finish, Rev. Cheryl tells me that

our presence has more effect than we can even imagine because it is changing some troubling family dynamics. God enlarged what we did to make a ripple we never even dreamed about.

- I think of what Reverend Yohanna told us about the layette, school and health kits we sent to Nigeria. When they are distributed sometimes God uses those few little items to change lives, sometimes even families and sometimes even whole villages for Christ. Enlarging the circle of love.
- I think of our church on the brink of a new era in our ministry. What would happen if we all really prayed "Enlarge the boundaries of our dreams, and our vision . . ."
- To tell you the truth, I have been praying the prayer of Jabez for a month now.
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my love
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my energy
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my understanding of this person.
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my hope.
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my faith
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my understanding of this scripture.
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my desire for you
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my vision for what we can be as a church.
  - I have been Praying God Bless me by enlarging my hand to reach out to people who are different from me.

And do you know what? It works! I firmly believe that is why God planted the idea of "Go be the church" Sunday in my heart

I firmly believe that is why I am beginning to see what the future of our congregation might look like.

I firmly believe that is why our work on Friday may have longer lasting effects, and more ripples than I could have ever imagined.

Too many of us, I fear, are like people who stand on the sandy shore of a lake thinking it is the ocean. Too many of us I fear come to the end of the pew, or the church door, or the edge of town , or the edge of the county, or the edge of the state and think that is the end of our territory. No wonder our Lord said, "Go into all the world . . ." He knew our tendency was to have a small vision; an undersized reach. And a stunted ministry.

What could God do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your faith?

What could God do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your Christian influence?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your generosity?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your love?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your vision for the church?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge your opportunity to help the church?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge our church's ministry, influence, or outreach?

What could god do with you if you were to cry out, boldly asking God to enlarge our church's ability to make a difference in the lives of our people and all his people anywhere?

We know very well the God who is small enough to reside in our very hearts. Let's not leave God trapped there. Let's also call out to the God who is big enough to cradle the whole universe in the palm of his hand.

-----

