

GOD'S HONORABLE MAN

"And Jabez was more honourable 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." I Chronicles 4:9-10.

These two verses flash like diamonds from the long lists of undistinguished names in the opening chapters of I Chronicles. This surprising history occurs in the midst of chapters that are full of nothing but names. It is like a flower that we come upon unexpectedly, growing among barren rocks, or a little bit of golden cloud appearing in a dull, dreary sky. Of the man whose name thus shines as a fine example to God's people in all ages, we know absolutely nothing beyond what is recorded in this brief passage of scripture. Like a meteor in the Old Testament sky, he only appears on one solitary occasion and then vanishes. He is never again spoken of in the Bible. Strangely enough, in the long genealogical table wherein he is introduced to us, we do not find even the name of either his father or his mother.

It is not said that this remarkable man was more wealthy, or more brilliant, or more healthy, or more popular than his brethren. The verdict of God's chronicler was simply that he was "more honorable" than they.

To be praised is what everybody wants; to be deserving of praise is what God wants -- for all of His children. To rate high with people is the ambition of the many; to rate high with God is the aspiration of the few. Jabez was in this select company. His total place in the Biblical record covers only two verses, but they are packed with descriptive phrases that are immensely revealing.

Let us look at "God's Honorable Man" and learn wherein his distinction was to be found.

I. He Had An Unusual Name.

His very name, "Jabez", is suggestive, and seems to have left an imprint on his own mind. It is vain to try to conjecture the particular distress which induced his mother thus to call him "Jabez", which means "sorrowful".

When an infant is born, the mother is generally quite happy. But unlike most parents, the mother of Jabez was not joyful at his birth. Jabez was born in a sorrowful time. There were sorrowful conditions round about him. He lived in a very stormy and war-like age. Some suppose that his mother was sorrowful because her husband had recently died and left her a widow. Whatever the reason, when the friends assembled at the time of giving the child its name, instead of choosing a joyful one, she said, "Call him Jabez." You may ask, why did she call him that? I can not tell. Perhaps she visualized her little son growing up without a father's protection and care. Likely the future looked very dreary to her. Maybe she thought that her boy as well as herself would have nothing but sorrow in their future lives; that without a stronger arm to lean upon he would only be a cause of anxiety to her. Seemingly she felt as if she could never be happy again; that her boy would bring nothing but additional care, anxiety and grief.

II. He Sprang From Obscurity.

Most of us have given little heed to this interesting character who came from obscurity and somehow managed to get a place in God's "Social Register". It is also surprising and fascinating too. You are reading along in this fourth chapter of I Chronicles, wondering how much longer these odd-sounding names are going to run. And then, suddenly, in the midst of these names you come upon that of Jabez. In the desert an oasis! Among the low drab hills a towering, sun-kissed peak! That was Jabez!

We make a mistake when we imagine that we must have titles and wealth and press agents and a lot of other silly accouterments in order to achieve distinction and honor. Edgar Guest put his finger on something worth-while when he wrote:

"The backbone of the nation is the happy-hearted throng.
Of ordinary people who go swinging right along.
They live in modest houses and they work from day to day,
And the papers never notice what they do or what they say."

If history teaches anything, it teaches us that God seems to have a fondness for getting hold of very commonplace persons and transferring them into uncommon saints, or leaders, or reformers, or preachers, or missionaries. Where did He get Moses? Out of the obscurity of a humble home among the Hebrew slaves of Egypt. Where did He get Gideon? Out of the obscurity of a little wheat farm in Ephraim. Where did He get David? Out of the obscurity of the large family of Jesse where fame had never been known to rest. Where did He get Peter and John? Out of the obscurity of their unheralded toil as fishermen. Where did He get Dwight L. Moody? Out of the obscurity of a little shoe store lost among the big palaces of merchandise in Boston.

These incidents are endless in God's great pattern of doing things. They call us to sound thinking. They summon us to clear judgments of values. They tell us that obscurity should never stifle or strangle us. They drive home the truth that, however undistinguished a person may be, we can serve our God in a distinguished way. Jabez, along with many another unsung member of the guild of the Godly, sprang out of obscurity into everlasting remembrance.

III. He Surmounted His Obstacles.

Jabez did not have smooth sailing. Times were threatening. Trials were numerous. Difficulties challenged his unfolding character. Despite it all, linked up with God as he was, Jabez came through, like a storm-battered ship steaming into port, its flags frayed from the gale but still flying top-mast.

One danger we face in lauding the heroes of the yesterdays is that we shall forget or be ignorant of the fierce and flaming troubles they endured before they reached the place of eminence for which we honor them.

Thank God for Jabez. The Lord enabled him to turn his sorrows into splendors, his troubles into treasures and his bane into beauty. Paul said, "Now I would have you know, brethren, that what I have gone through has turned out for the furtherance of the gospel rather than otherwise." For God's Honorable Man trouble isn't frustration it is furtherance.

IV. He Was Characterized By Humility.

Verse ten opens with the statement "And Jabez called on the God of Israel." That, of course, is the very thing that a proud man refuses to do. There are times when a whole culture will develop along lines of such strutting self-sufficiency that its victims are ashamed to confess their need of God.

On one side of us we have the Communists, yelling about religion being "the opiate of the people," telling "the workers of the world" to unite and take by force, if necessary, those things that will satisfy their stomachs, meanwhile forgetting about the soul that is an imaginary thing anyhow.

On the other side, we have the typical neo-pagan American whose only gospel is that of worldly success, for which the recipe is, "Get in there and pitch, and make your pile any way you can, while the making is good. The church is all right for children and old ladies, but it is stuffy and useless and impractical for healthy red-blooded men and women who want to be up-to-date."

Whether one's irreligion takes one form or another, it is made of the whole cloth of human vanity and self-reliance. And don't forget this: sooner or later the cloth turns out to be rotten. It is well to bear in mind that attempting to scuttle God from your universe is not only bad for your morals, it is bad for your morale. It is a form both of conceit and deceit to suppose that we are strongest when we are independent. We are strongest when we are humbly dependent upon the God Who has given us our being, Who has redeemed us in His Son Jesus Christ and Who will judge us in His truth and perfection.

V. He Regarded Prayer As A Necessity.

The trouble with the average person in our mechanized age is that he knows more about horsepower than he does about prayer-power. Horsepower gives out; prayer-power never gives out. Jabez made that discovery over thirty centuries ago. If you will examine his prayer, you will see that it was remarkably comprehensive, direct, and earnest.

1. It was a prayer for grace.

"Oh, that thou wouldest bless me indeed." He wanted something real. Now that is what the world is after today. It is not content to take anything on trust. It wants to go right down to the foundations. It wants absolute reality. It wants to reach the ultimate.

"Bless me indeed!" cried Jabez. Whatever he may have meant by it, we Christians know what we mean by it. We mean, "Grant us, O God, Thy very nature to become the central and governing glory of our lives." If you will talk to God like that and mean it, then you will join the ranks of God's honorable ones.

There are many varieties of blessings. Some are blessings only in name: they gratify our wishes for a moment, but permanently disappoint our expectations. They charm the eye, but pall on the taste. Others are mere temporary blessings: they perish with the using. Though for awhile they regale the senses, they cannot satisfy the higher cravings of the soul. Let the grace of God prompt it, let the choice of God appoint it, let the bounty of God confer it, and then the endowment shall be something indeed.

To put it in another light, we may compare the blessing Jabez craved with those blessings that are temporal and transient. One of the first cravings of men's heart is wealth. How many have thought if they once possessed it they should be blessed indeed! But there are ten thousand proofs that happiness does not consist in the abundance of things which a man possesseth.

Another transient blessing which our poor humanity fondly covets and eagerly pursues is fame. In this respect we would fain be more honorable than our brethren, and outstrip all our competitors. But here, as of riches, it is indisputable that the greatest fame does not bring with it any equal measure of gratification.

Another temporal blessing which men desire, and legitimately may wish for, is that of health. Can we ever prize it sufficiently? To trifle with such a boon is the madness of folly. The highest eulogiums that can be passed on health would not be extravagant.

Blessings indeed are such blessings as come from the pierced hand; blessings that come from Calvary's bloody tree, streaming from the Saviour's wounded side. Any blessing that comes as the result of the Holy Spirit's work in thy soul is a blessing indeed.

2. It was a prayer for growth.

"That Thou wouldest enlarge my coast." We may be sure of this, that he was not thinking of mere personal aggrandisement. It would seem that he did include the gift of increased resources, influence, and spiritual power.

Whatever direction our praying takes -- whether for the affairs of the body or the needs of the soul -- the stretch of our askings should be toward enlargement and growth. Compassion, courage, hope --- are these graces alive in you? Then they are growing. If they are growing, it is because you live in the atmosphere of prayer.

Let us pray that the Lord will "enlarge our coasts." We must not be circumscribed in spiritual things. We must not live always within these narrow bounds. There are bright and glorious tracts beyond. We need to know more of God, more of Christ, and more of self. We must not be content to remain as we are, while there is so much to do, so much to learn, and so much to enjoy.

3. It was a prayer for guidance.

"That thine hand may be with me." Only an humble man could have prayed that. There was a time when he thought his own arm was strong enough. It is a great thing to be sure that God's hand is with you when you are going out to live your life, or to do God's work. We need His hand to guide, to sustain, to restrain, under all circumstances of difficulty, responsibility, and danger.

4. It was a prayer for godliness.

"And that thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me." This petition suggests that God is the only sufficient Protector against sin. On the basis of natural good sense and from observation, Jabez had been convinced that wrongdoing is not passed by without retribution sure and certain; that "God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth that will he also reap." Jabez was afraid of evil lest it should hurt him. That is one way of looking upon sin. It can produce nothing but pain and tribulation in the end. "O that Thou wouldest keep me from evil, that it may not grieve me." That is the prayer for godliness, which climaxes the prayer for grace, for growth, and for guidance. And God answered his prayer and granted his request. He granted his request because the request was in accordance with his will.

In this prayer of Jabez we have a complete epitome of what we should ask God for ourselves — grace, growth, guidance, and godliness. These petitions characterize God's honorable people. The word "honorable" comes from a root which means weight. So, we may read, "Jabez was more weighty than his brethren." He was a man not of bluff and bluster, not of froth and foam, but of substance and worth. That substance was not anything physical. Rather, it was the God-possessed character of the man. It is always so.

A little boy was on the scales, and his playmate was looking on. Being eager to outweigh his pal, he puffed out his cheeks and did his best to make his little body to swell up like a frog. But the playmate, a little older and a little wiser, merely laughed a hearty laugh and cried in his glee: "Ha! Ha! That doesn't do any good; you can only weigh what you are!"

How correct he was! God's man, God's honorable man, has weight. It is the weight of what he is by the grace of God.