

The last several weeks we've been coming to God with a simple request: *teach us to pray*. We've seen examples of how to pray in specific times of life—when we want God to empower us, provide for us, guide us, or forgive us. Thanks to Jeff for bringing the Word last week. Today, we are going to focus on a prayer that we can offer in any and every season of life, a prayer that we can offer up every single day! We are going to learn from a man named Jabez how to boldly and confidently ask for God's blessing on our lives. About 25 years ago there was a short book written about his prayer. It stayed at the top of the NYT bestseller list for 94 straight weeks and sold over 10 million copies. Jabez' prayer is short and simple, but it's also impactful and powerful, and many people have found that it grew their faith and transformed the way they relate to God.

If you have your Bible, turn with me to 1 Chronicles 4. The book of Chronicles was written about 400 years before the time of Christ in the wake of a national crisis. The Israelites had just returned from exile and were working on rebuilding their cities and re-establishing their nation. The book was written to help them remember who they were, the promises God made, and the plans he had for them. The first nine chapters of this book cover a span of 1500 years and mention over 500 names. These are their ancestors, those who have come before them, those who paved the way for them. Almost all 500 of those names are listed in order. Here's a man, here are all his sons. Here's a man, here all his sons. Here's a man, here are all his sons. No detail. No context. No story. No commentary. Just names. But in this long list of names, we come to 1 Chronicles 4:9-10, and when the author comes to the name "Jabez," he stops, and instead of telling us about Jabez' family members, he tells us about Jabez' life.

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.

That's all we know about this man—he came to God and he asked God to bless him, and not only did God say yes, but God also decided that his prayer was important enough to include in the Bible so that every generation since then could learn how to come to God and seek God for his blessing on their lives, too. How many of us would like God's blessing on our lives? All of us! Of course we want God to bless us. Today, we get to learn how to ask God for his blessing!

Believe God wants to bless you

This might sound like a very elementary first step, but it's a larger hurdle for many of us than we realize. Before we come to God and ask him to bless us, we must believe that he is a good father who desires to bless us, who wants to pour out abundance, favor, and goodness on our lives. When I was preparing to graduate college, a close friend asked me what I thought I would do after school. I gave a picture of my dream job at what I thought was the best church in the country, under the most dynamic, innovative, godly pastors in America. Then I said, "But if I'm honest, I think I'll probably end up in a role I don't like very much," and I gave a picture of what for me would be a miserable job. Then my friend asked me, "Why do you think God, instead of opening a door at a place you would love, in job you would be great at, would send you instead to a place you would hate and a job you would be bad at?" This conversation was 18 years ago. I can remember the exact Cheddar's restaurant and even the table I was sitting at when it dawned on me: "When I look down deep, I don't believe God wants what's best for me. I would rather give myself challenges and obstacles rather than blessing and favor." I never would have said that out loud, but in my heart, my core belief about God was short-circuited. I thought he wanted to punish me. From talking to people as a pastor for many years now, I know that is a common and wide-spread belief.

That's why when Jesus taught his followers to pray, he told them to ask, to seek, to knock, then he said, "'Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?'" (Matthew 7:9). Of course, the answer is none of us! We're not giving our kids coal for Christmas. We give them wonderful presents, and we get out the camera to take pictures of their joy, because there is nothing that brings a loving parent more happiness than the happiness of their children. We all get that! If Hudson asks me for a Lego set, am I going to say, "Three years ago you hit your brothers, so the answer is no"? Of course not!

Then Jesus says, "If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7:11). Jesus says, "If earthly parents want to give good gifts to their children, how much more would God want to give good gifts to his children!" Prayer often begins with us asking God to heal or repair that place in our heart that is short-circuited, where we are reluctant to believe or trust that God wants the very best for us, that he really is a good Father who loves us and delights in us.

Remember that dream job I talked about at one of the best churches in the country, with a pastor who was one of the most sought after and influential preachers in America? A few months after I had that conversation at Cheddar's, two weeks before graduation, without my ever reaching out, ever sending a resume or email or anything, the pastor somehow got my phone number, called me up out of the blue, and told me he wanted to offer me a job at his church. It was identical to the dream job I had described to my friend. God began the process of teaching me that he really does delight in showering blessings on his children. If past hurts or disappointments have made it hard for you to believe God wants the best for you and delights in blessing you, ask God to help heal that. We won't pray for blessings unless we believe he wants to bless us.

Pray within biblical guardrails

Yes, the Bible teaches us to pray for God's blessing. But God isn't a genie in a bottle. We aren't given a blank check to tell God to give us anything in the world we ask for. If you think about a road being the avenue of God's blessings, this is a very broad road, but the Scriptures give us guardrails to stay within when we ask. The first guardrail is "God's will." Yes, we can ask God for whatever is on our hearts, but we must have the humility to realize God is sovereign, God is all knowing, he understands everything, he sees the end from the beginning. His plans and ways are higher than ours. We are thinking in terms of days and weeks; he's thinking in terms of lifespans, centuries and millennia. Ultimately, we can bring as bold a request as possible, but we must have the trust to say, "God, if it's not in your will, I don't want it!" This is what Jesus does. He asks, the night before he is to die, for God to provide another way, for him not to be killed on a cross. He makes a very understandable prayer for blessing. "'Abba, Father,' he said, 'everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me'" (Mark 14:36). But then he keeps his prayer within the boundary of God's perfect plan and says, "'Yet not what I will, but what you will.'" This is how Jesus prayed and it's how we can pray. Pray for what is on your heart, pray for deliverance from suffering, pray for huge blessings, but in humility and trust, stay within this guardrail. Listen to what 1 John 5:14 tells us: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us." Remember, God is so perfect, so sovereign, and so good that if it's not in his will, we don't want it.

The second guard rail is "pure motives." God cares not only about what we're asking for, but he also cares about why we're asking for it. "You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:2-3). Imagine how I would respond differently to my son asking me for money based upon his motives. If Hudson comes to me and says, "Dad, can I have \$20?" I would naturally ask, "Why?" If he

said, “I want to go to Kroger and get the biggest bag of candy I can get and eat the entire thing at once,” I would say, “I’m not giving you \$20 to indulge your cravings. That would be destructive for you.” I would be a bad father if I gave him the money. But if he said, “I know it’s mom’s birthday coming up. I’ve been saving up my money to get her this beautiful present that I know she’ll love, but with all my savings, I still don’t have enough. I was hoping you could help me bless her.” How different is that? I want to be honest about my parenting skills: my son has never once come and asked me to bless him so that he can bless someone else. He is focused entirely on himself. I am waiting for the day when his focus and motives turn outward instead of inward. How much more I’ll be able to entrust him with on that day. Your heavenly Father has the same heart for you. If we stay between the guardrails of God’s will and pure motives, the highway of God’s blessings is wide and expansive, and we can ask with boldness and confidence.

Live an honorable life

This comes right from the passage. 1 Chronicles 4:9 says, “Jabez was more honorable than his brothers.” He was upright. He had character and integrity and his honorable life invited God’s blessing! A while back Keren and I had taken our kids out for the night. We ate at a restaurant and then were walking downtown, and a couple walked by us, each holding delicious looking ice cream cones. Addie saw them, and I could immediately tell the wheels in her brain were turning. She looked back at me and said, “Daddy, did we finish all of our food at dinner?” She knows not to even ask for a treat unless all the kids finish their food. What we see not just with our own kids, but in the kingdom is that blessings follow obedience. Let me show you how common this throughout Scripture. In 1 Peter, God is speaking specifically to men and he says, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7). Did you see that, husbands? If you are not considerate and respectful to your wife, there will be an impediment in your prayers. If God has given you the responsibility to care for, love, respect, and honor his daughter, and you are shirking that responsibility and being neglectful or a bully, he’s not going to respond to your prayers. You’d better start blessing his daughter if you want him to bless you! Just a few verses later, the same principle is expanded to everybody: “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer” (1 Peter 3:12). Every day, there are millions of prayers offered up to God. But just like when you are in a crowded room and there is a ton of noise, if you are looking at your friend and you see their mouth move, you can drown out all the other sounds and key in on just what they are saying, that’s what God does to the prayers of the righteous. When you live an honorable life, God honors your prayers.

I hesitate to talk about money, because it can seem so material, but finances are one of the biggest areas where God says that his blessings follow obedience. I can’t tell you the number of people who have said to me, “Our finances were a constant source of struggle, always uphill. And then we started trusting God with our money, bringing the full tithe to our church, and we can’t explain it, but it’s like the dam broke and blessings have been rushing toward us ever since.” The number of testimonies is comical. But it’s the very thing he promised to do.

“You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.” (Malachi 3:9-10)

God wants to bless us, but sometimes our disobedience locks the doors of heavens so his blessings can’t flow down to us. The man who did our pre-marriage counseling used to say, every time we were together, “Obedience opens doors.” An honorable life invites God’s favor and blessings.

Ask for God's provision

Tell God what you want very specifically. You know he wants to bless you, you are asking within his will, for a good purpose, you are living an honorable life, and now you approach God boldly and confidently and ask. That's what Jabez did. He said, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory!" He is asking for God's favor on his life, and for God to increase his influence. They had an agricultural community, so when he says, "Enlarge my territory," he's asking for more land, but it's not like asking God for an extra acre in your back yard; it was more like an employee asking for additional responsibility—for a promotion and the raise that comes with it. But we must also remember that land meant something special in Israel, because this wasn't just any land, it was the promised land. His territory growing meant that the promises God made to his people were becoming reality through him. Jabez is not asking for more land so he can have an easy life or comfortable retirement; rather, Jabez is asking for God to fulfill his promises and carry out his plans for the world through him. Jabez is saying, "God, I know you are at work, I know you are up to something. Would you trust me more so I can be a part of your mission?"

That's what we need to do, too. John Piper says: "Lay hold on God for some great biblical vision for your life on this earth and don't let go until you have it from his merciful hand." Do you see what he's saying? "God, I want my life to matter for eternity. I want my life to honor you and serve others. Pour out your blessings from heaven so that can be reality." When God chose to bless Israel, it wasn't for Israel's sake; it was for the sake of the world. "I will bless you; I will make your name great...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). God blessed him, but it was to be a blessing to others. "Whoever refreshes others will be refreshed" (Proverbs 11:25). God doesn't want you to be a reservoir, where the blessings flow and then are contained for years. He wants you to be a river, where blessings are constantly flowing both in and out. "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10). This is why God gives us gifts—so they can be used for others. Come to God, seek him for blessings, and the more you give, the more you will receive! When I pray for people who are sick, I always ask God to extend their days or grant them renewed strength, so that with their lease on life and good health, they can serve him. Blessed, yes. But blessed for a purpose. Blessed to be a blessing. The same is true for your finances, your house, your family, you name it—God doesn't just want to bless you, he wants to bless you to be a blessing!

Pursue God's presence

Jabez didn't just seek God's blessing, he sought God. "Let your hand be with me." More than Jabez wanted anything from God, he wanted God. "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple" (Psalm 27:4). Other blessings are nice, but God himself is the ultimate blessing. Wherever God is, blessings are abundant. It's like the sun—wherever the sun is, there is going to be light. Light flows from the sun; that's just how it works. That's how blessings work. Perhaps the fundamental truth about blessing from the entire Bible is that blessings flow from God's presence. What does that mean? You might be able to find some residual blessings and joy apart from God, simply because you are in the sphere of his grace. But there is simply no way to experience ultimate blessing apart from God. That doesn't exist. Remember Moses? God told him, "You can go into the Promised Land and have freedom and a life of abundance, but I'm not going with you." Moses just said, "No! No! If you don't go with us, we aren't going. We'd rather die in the wilderness with you than lounge in luxury without you. You are the blessing!"

There is this neat story in the Old Testament about King David. He wanted to bring the ark of God into the city of Jerusalem. The ark was the physical dwelling place of God on earth. One of the attendants named Uzzah touched the ark while it was being transported, and the ark was so holy and sacred that

Uzzah died. So King David reasoned, “Let’s not bring the ark to the capital, maybe the same thing will happen to us.” “The ark of the Lord remained in the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite for three months” (2 Samuel 6:11). Then word got to David about what happened. “Now King David was told, ‘The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-Edom and everything he has, because of the ark of God’” (2 Samuel 6:12). God’s presence was there, so the blessings flowed. If you want a blessed life, forget the blessings, seek God’s presence, and know that the blessings will take care of themselves.

Seek God’s shalom

“Shalom” is the biblical word that means peace and protection. It means that we are under God’s canopy and shelter and every part of our life is safe. Jabez concludes his prayer by saying, “Keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” He’s not only asking for God’s presence and God’s blessings, he’s asking for God to keep him from danger, evil, sin, and pain. But there is something unique about his specific request to be kept from pain: his name means pain! “His mother had named him Jabez, saying, ‘I gave birth to him in pain.’” His birth brought so much pain to his mother that she named him pain. That’s what “Jabez” means. He was marked with that description for his entire life. He’d walk into a room and people would literally say, “Here comes pain, here comes suffering, here comes trial, here comes affliction.” That was the label given to him. When he prays, “Keep me free from pain,” he is inviting God into his broken story and asking God to help him drop his label, for God to give him a new name and a new identity. He’s asking God not only to bless his present and his future, but also to bless his past and heal the hurtful things from his childhood. That’s why we ask for shalom, encompassing peace and protection, over our entire story.

I know that resonates with many of us. Some of us have been walking around with the label ‘pain’ for years. It’s time to ask God not just for blessing on the outside, but also for healing on the inside. We don’t want God only to protect us from pain in the future; we want him to heal us from the pain of our past—the addiction, the abuse, the assault, the affair, the divorce, the loss of a loved one. Those things have shaped us so much that when we think of ourselves, they are synonymous with us. They have shaped our identity for too long. Like Jabez, we can come to God, ask him to bless us, and ask for those blessings to be so grand, so encompassing, for his shalom to be so great, that they change not only our present and our future, but heal our past.

We are going to give you some space right now to think about what we just learned from God’s word.

How to pray for God’s blessing:

1. Believe God wants to bless you.
2. Pray within Biblical guardrails.
3. Live an honorable life.
4. Ask for God’s provision.
5. Pursue God’s presence.
6. Seek God’s shalom.

With this in your mind, we are going to give you a few minutes to pray to God and ask him to bless your life. Be bold. Be confident. Be specific. Know that God is a good father who delights to provide for his children!