

July 20-24, 2020 Edition

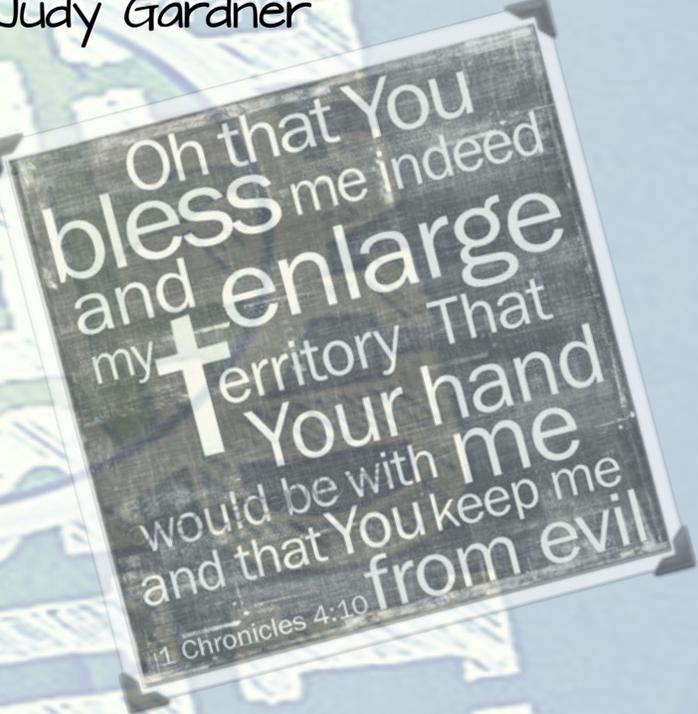
The "Big Story" Of The Bible

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament

The Prayer Of Jabez

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

July 18/19, 2020



Oh that You
bless me indeed
and enlarge
my territory That
Your hand
would be with me
and that You keep me
from evil
1 Chronicles 4:10

When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;D) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: I have to make a confession- this week was a tough one for me. I had lots of emotional and physical work to do and by the time I got to tonight (Friday July 17th at about 8:45 PM) I knew I wasn't going to be putting together a brand new lesson on the tower of Babel (as I had planned). So I started thinking about what Judy calls the best-of-Eds. In other words lessons that I love and that have had a profound impact on my own life that are pretty easy to give without too much of brain power or energy. Jabez leapt to mind. It's a great lesson (not the one I gave but the concept found in the book of 1 Chronicles) and was an important part of my life and so I figured it was a no brainer.

So I pulled up the lesson I've done probably 8 times in the 20 years I've been preaching at this church and sort of tweaked it to go with the Old Testament series we're currently going through. I started looking through the book of James to find a leaping off point for Jabez (NOT something I want my preaching professor from seminary to know I did- that's not how you're supposed to approach the scriptures when planning a sermon but there you go- Hi, I'm Ed and I sometimes take the lazy approach to sermon planning). So there's my confession- now let's get started, shall we?

Do you think the Scriptures have no meaning? They say that God is passionate that the spirit he has placed within us should be faithful to him. And he gives grace generously. As the Scriptures say, God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." So humble yourselves before God. James 4:5-7 (NLT)

I grew up hearing that all the time- God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. But why? Why would God EVER make Himself the opponent of a human being? I just didn't get it. But now I do. Arrogance is the thing God opposes in us more than anything else. It's a deadly sin (it even made the list of the 7-deadly-sins). Why? Because arrogance is the one trait that will make us decide God is irrelevant in our lives. God knows better. And He knows what will happen to us if we try to live our lives without His guidance and direction (which is what humility is all about- letting God set the pace, the direction, the pit-stops and the final destination of our lives)- we will end up making ourselves and everyone around us miserable. And He cares too much to just let us do that without trying to get our attention and lead us back into a relationship built on humility. James even says that God is "passionate" about us. He cares SO much. If we're throwing away our lives God will do everything He can to warn us and wake us up. He wants us to live miraculous, world changing lives (which often doesn't mean the same thing we would think it would but more on that later).

The Bible is filled with stories about people who woke up and got with God's program. There are household names like Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Daniel, Gideon, Deborah, Ruth, Esther and Jabez. That's right- Jabez. Never heard of him (if you've attended Riverside long you have but if not maybe you haven't)? Maybe that's because he only gets two verses of the entire Bible devoted to telling his story. So what makes his story stand out? Well, part of it is it comes in the middle of what I often considered to be endless genealogies (you know... the "begats"?) that I never considered to be terribly important for us today. Here's just a bit of them:

The descendants of Adam were Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah. 1 Chronicles 1:1-4 (NLT)

Snoozeville, right? The books of Chronicles pretty much start out just "chronicling" (is that even a word? I guess it is now) the family tree of the people of God. For 9 chapters this is pretty much the way the book goes- nobody gets much press. They all are pretty much just mentioned and that's it. Some of the most famous names in the history of this planet are only mentioned in passing. But in the middle of all that in chapter 4 this happens:

There was a man named Jabez who was more honorable than any of his brothers. His mother named him Jabez because his birth had been so painful. He was the one who prayed to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and expand my territory! Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain!" And God granted him his request. 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 (NLT)

Now I know that when I pull it out of its context and print it here that might not seem like a terribly impressive legacy that old Jabez leaves behind but when you consider that his name comes in the middle of hundreds of other names that only get mentioned but when the Chronicler gets to him he has to stop and tell you at least a bit about him then it starts to make a bit more sense. Jabez' story is important enough for the Chronicler to stop what he's doing and tell us about him so I would imagine his story is important enough for us to take a few days looking at even though he's been dead for thousands of years.

And then there's this- that little prayer Jabez prayed has changed the lives of millions of people around the world and I'm one of them. This simple little prayer has played a huge role in my own life. So huge I felt like it was important enough to do a lesson on during this year-of-wisdom lesson series. Yes- I know I told you I picked this lesson because it would be easy to deliver while I was out of town but what I didn't know was that I had never done devotional reflections for this lesson. So here I sit on Friday night feverishly typing away because I think this material is so important I want there be something that we can all reflect on throughout the week and ask ourselves if this is a prayer maybe we should all be praying. So much for me being lazy I guess ;o)

Tuesday Reflection: So what do we learn from this little prayer of Jabez'? Well first we learn that Jabez had a big-dream. If you and I are going to live lives that matter we also will have to have big dreams. So what was Jabez' dream? Land. That's right, land:

He was the one who prayed to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and expand my territory!" 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 (NLT)

Jabez asked that God "expand his territory". What in the world does that mean? Well, in ancient Israel the land was sort of the way they viewed their legacy. When the people of Israel came into the Promised Land they were each given a parcel of the promise. They were not allowed to sell the land (they could lease the land out but every 49th year- the year of Jubilee- the land was all supposed to go back to the families it had been given to when Israel inhabited the land. It's a pretty cool concept but there's zero record of Israel ever actually doing this which is really sad when you think about it) and yet sometimes they did and it caused some pretty serious issues. I mean, if the land is how you view your legacy and even was a big part of your understanding of eternity then not having much would really mess with a person.

So Jabez' great dream was for God to expand his territory. I love how the Chronicler tells us that Jabez was "the one who prayed". I am fascinated with that statement. Does that mean most people didn't pray back then? Or is the Chronicler simply telling us that Jabez was the guy who prayed this specific prayer? Nobody knows for sure but whatever the reason Jabez' situation was unique. He prayed a prayer asking that God's blessing and power would be poured out into his life. Have you ever done that?

I remember when I first took over as the pastor here at Riverside I was very concerned about becoming arrogant and proud if I did well. So I used to pray this prayer: "Lord... make us the smallest church in Eagle River... but make every church in Eagle River HUGE... like a thousand people at each church with Riverside the smallest one in the bunch." I thought I was being SO humble. I wondered if possibly I was the most humble preacher in all of Eagle River? Heck, maybe all of Alaska! Who else would think to pray so humble a prayer?

I prayed that prayer for a few months and God answered my prayer- kind of. He definitely honored the whole "make us the smallest church in Eagle River" part of my prayer. Then one day someone handed me a little book by Bruce Wilkinson called The Prayer Of Jabez. It was a tiny little book but that tiny book changed my life. In that book it was pointed out that Jabez asked for something big. Something huge. Something life changing. It was pointed out that many of the heroes in the Bible started their adventure with God by asking for something amazing. Bruce Wilkinson invited everyone who read the book to ask for something great. He pointed out that God wants His people to dream great dreams for Him.

I mean, sure, arrogance and pride and superiority are like cancers in our lives. But so is intentionallessness. That's right- intentionallessness. Or a lack of intentionality if you prefer. So is this hyper-pseudo-humility that doesn't dream of doing anything great. God is world changer and His intention is that we be world changers too. I had a major shift in my thinking. I'm not a great planner or administrator. I'm also not good at figuring out what God wants from me, details wise. I know there are those people out there and I see them dreaming on a scale that is WAY beyond my ability to comprehend but every time I get too detailed in my dreams and prayers it doesn't go so well. Maybe you've heard the saying, "man plans and God laughs"? For me it would be "Ed plans and God cringes". So I started praying this prayer:

Lord I'm bored... I'm tired of easy, give me exciting! Do something nobody's ever seen before through me and through Riverside. I have no idea what that will look like so You just work it out better than I could have dreamed or imagined or planned on my own.

And if you know Riverside Community Church then you know- God answered my prayer. I was always hesitant to become a preacher because all the preachers I knew seemed so sure of themselves. They seemed to always know what the next step was (at least they pretended to know). That wasn't me. I always wondered what kind of strange church would have me as their preacher. And now I know- Riverside! We do church different at Riverside because I don't think we could do church-as-usual with me as the pastor. God has done and is doing something totally unique at Riverside. As soon as I started praying that prayer things started jumping in my personal life and at Riverside. We started to see visitors at our Sunday worship gatherings. VISITORS!!!! And most of them decided to stick around. STICK AROUND!!!! What. Was.

Happening???? Nobody knew but we were thankful for the excitement. At least, most of us were.

A few months after I added that prayer to my every day prayer list I was talking with Judy and she wondered aloud what caused all the uproar in our lives. Did I mention I often miss details? I had started praying that prayer and prayed it every day but didn't really connect that new prayer with the upheaval (good upheaval but still upheaval) in my/our lives. When it dawned on me I told her about this new prayer I was praying. Judy listened patiently but grew a bit more agitated as time went on and when I finally told her I had started praying "Lord, I'm tired of boring- give me exciting" she said, "YOU PRAYED WHAT?!?!!" Not that she was opposed to the prayer or the upheaval but she explained as patiently as she could that information like that was important to share with one another so both of us could be prepared and grateful for whatever followed. I learned during that season that God could and would do amazing things in our lives if we'd just ask:

*Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.
Jeremiah 33:3 (NIV)*

I did and He did. Will you? I'm not saying God will give you exactly what you ask for. And if you're asking for God to do something about one of your relationships remember- even God can't (ok- won't. I mean He totally could but He chooses not to) change other people without their consent. The only way you'll ever change the people in your life is by changing yourself so this isn't some kind of miracle fix-all-the-people-in-my-life-who-refuse-to-get-with-the-program kind of thing. But what I've discovered is God can and will do things beyond our own capacity to even know to ask for them if we ask Him to do something amazing and then step back and let Him be God.

Wednesday Reflection: The next thing Jabez teaches us is that we've got to have a growing faith. But that word is so strange, isn't it? What exactly is faith? And what isn't it? I guess at its most basic definition faith is the willingness to trust God. Not to simply believe that He exists or to agree that He's right about everything but to then let those beliefs in His existence and right-ness change the way I live my life. Am I doing the things Jesus asks me to do- even when it's scary, tough or confusing? That's faith. My favorite analogy of faith is a picture Jesus painted once while He was talking to a group of people who would have been able to identify with Jabez all to well:

Then Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear, and the burden I give you is light." Matthew 11:28-30 (NLT)

I don't know about you but when I see that word, "yoke", it doesn't sound much like rest to me. But it is- and getting in that yoke and following where Jesus leads is what a life of faith looks like. Because a yoke wasn't a typical harness where one animal is forced to do all the work. A yoke is an instrument that binds two animals together in perfect unity and focuses all the power of the two animals into one point so that (according to physicists and they can't be wrong, right?) the resulting force is more than double what one could have done alone.

And not only was the yoke used to get more bang for a farmer's buck but it was also used as a training tool for young, obstinate oxen. Most oxen aren't keen on doing what anyone else wants them to do. You've probably heard the term, stubborn as an ox? Where do you think that comes from? An ox has to learn to be led and guided. So when a farmer was breaking in a new, young ox he would pair that ox with an older, wiser, stronger and more willing to be led ox so that the young ox had no choice but to go where the farmer coaxed the older, stronger, wiser ox to go. Over time the young stubborn ox would become a wiser more flexible ox because of the yoke.

That's why this yoke thing brings rest. I'm not doing the work by myself. And to bring this illustration home even more Jesus drops this bomb on the people listening to Him that day and on us reading about it 2,000 years later- it's His yoke. What that means is it's not just any old ox we're getting paired up with- it's Jesus Himself. Think about that for a minute- that means if the force gets focused at the focal point of the yoke then no matter how much strength I'm bringing to the party Jesus' strength is also being added. That means that even though Jesus' yoke isn't about a Lazy Boy recliner or a hammock where I take the day off of work it's still an invitation to rest because no matter how much weight I'm pulling Jesus is doing the Lion's share of the work (because He's the Lion Of Judah- get it? See what I did there? I have to say sometimes I tickle myself but I'm digressing again. Although as I sit here typing I have to wonder if I'm in the yoke with Jesus was that His joke and not mine? Doesn't matter- I'll take it either way ;o)

So what does all that have to do with Jabez? He wanted in on the yoke (even though Jesus hadn't made that analogy yet and wouldn't for another few dozen centuries the principle is the same):

Please be with me in all that I do. 1 Chronicles 4:10 (NLT)

This was a novel idea in ancient Israel. Most Israelites saw God as being present at the Temple or Tabernacle. The idea of God "being with me" wasn't a prevalent one. But Jabez asks for God's presence. It's almost like he was reading through Genesis and Exodus or something and realized a miraculous life is always accompanied by God's presence. So Jabez asked for something unusual- for God to be "with him" in all that he did. And that is faith. God will walk with anyone if we would only ask Him to. Where God leads us won't always make sense and sometimes it won't feel very good but with God in our lives He always works out the things that happen to us (whether good or bad) for our ultimate good. And you don't have to be talented or rich or good looking or strong:

The eyes of the LORD search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. 2 Chronicles 16:9 (NLT)

Notice it doesn't say the eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to find those who are messing up. How hard would that be? Not very in my experience. It also does not say the eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to find those who are strong or talented or rich or who smell good. God can use all those kinds of people but it's not the requirement He's looking for. What is? Full commitment. If you are willing to ask God to "be with you in all you do" and get into the yoke of Jesus then watch out- there's no telling where God will lead you with Jesus doing the Lion's share of the work. But we have to let Him set the pace, the direction, the pit-stops and the destination of our lives or we've slipped the yoke and gone on a rampage without Him and that never ends well.

Thursday Reflection: So far this week we've seen that Jabez' prayer is marked by a great dream and a growing faith. Today we're going to look at how he also did one more thing that sets him apart from most of us- he asked for something great. What is it that was unique? Well yes, he asked for something great but it's more basic than that. He asked. He just asked. And because he asked, God did something amazing in his life. And what did he ask for? Well, he asked for God's presence (please be with me in all that I do), God's power (bless me and expand my territory) and God's protection:

Please be with me in all that I do, and keep me from all trouble and pain! 1 Chronicles 4:10 (NLT)

Now if you've been with us through this study of wisdom in 2018 then you know that's an interesting prayer to pray. Keep me from all trouble and pain. We know that that's not really possible. You won't find one person in the story of the Bible (including Jesus Himself) who lives a pain and trouble free life. In fact- the story of the Bible is one that from the time sin enters the world after Adam & Eve's snacking debacle (I just made that up- snacking debacle. I think I like it) this world (and everyone who lives in it) has been filled with trouble and pain. It's a consequence of living in this sin-infected, broken world. But it's not without it's sweetness. Before sin entered the world human life was an unending stream of unearned generosity and grace. After sin entered the world human life is wave after wave of pain and trouble (sometimes earned by our own stupid decisions and sometimes unearned and delivered to us compliments of a broken world or someone else's stupid decisions that splash over into our lives) and wave after wave of God's unearned generosity and grace. It's a surreal place to live and to try to figure out. As Jesus said in John 16:33-

In this world you will have trouble. But be brave for I have defeated the world!

And yet Jabez asks for God to keep him from all trouble and pain and (spoiler alert!!!) we will find out soon that "God granted him his request". I'm not sure exactly what that means. Does it mean that Jabez never again experienced trouble or pain in his life? I doubt it. I'm thinking there must be something else going on- something deeper. Or maybe, something much more surface level that if we could see this story the way an ancient reader saw it we'd understand immediately what's going on. So let's dig down a bit so we can understand what is probably a surface level concept.

In the ancient world people's names meant something. Not so much today. Today we name our kids for lots of different reasons but generally not because of what the name means. We had a tough time figuring out what to call our son. We were so sure we were having a little girl that we had a name all picked out and when we found out it was a boy we weren't sure what to call him. So we got a name book and went through it. Every name I liked Judy hated. Every name she liked, I hated. One little aside here- did you know the name, Gardner, can be a first name? We were going through the book and there it was. I looked up at Judy with a gleam in my eye and before I could say it she said, "we are NOT naming our son Gardner Gardner." My dreams were dashed before my very eyes. It was a sad day in the Gardner household. We settled on

Jonathan not because either one of us was particularly excited about it but because it was a name both of us could live with.

When Jonathan was a little boy he was getting on his mom's nerves one day so I took him out to the Alaska Wildberry store with the huge chocolate waterfall. We were sort of looking at all the knickknacks when I came across one of those racks with signs bearing people's names and the meaning of the name. I found one for Jonathan and it said it meant, gift-from-God (we had no idea that's what it meant but it turned out to be true in so many ways- we never dreamed he would be the only child we would be able to have and it all seemed so easy with him but we know now that every child is a gift from God). I showed it to Jonathan and he smiled and said, "I'll bet mom doesn't think so right now".

Touche, kid. Names. They don't mean much today. But in Jabez' day they did:

His mother named him Jabez because his birth had been so painful. 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 (NLT)

I imagine all you moms are thinking, "I've got a few Jabez' running around this world myself." I mean, aren't all births painful? This one must have been especially so. So much so that his mom named him "pain". Jabez literally means "pain" in Hebrew. How would you like to go through life with that label on you. You're out playing in the streets with your friends and your mom yells out the front door, "Hey Pain! It's time to come home for dinner!" Talk about a name to live down to.

All that to say I'm wondering if what the Bible means when it says God granted the request of Jabez that he be kept from all trouble and pain had more to do with the label he went through life with than actually being shielded from any more trouble or pain in this world for the rest of his life? I don't know for sure but I know this- that part of the prayer hasn't really worked in my own life. I've had plenty of trouble and pain in my life. Not as much as some of you. Maybe more than others. I'm not trying to keep score here but I'm simply reporting my experience. The book of Jabez should have come with a disclaimer- your results may vary.

But I still pray for God's protection in my life. It hasn't led to a trouble free, pain free life but it has meant that whatever trouble and pain I've had to face in my life, I haven't had to face it alone. I've been yoked together with Jesus through it all and that means that there is nothing in this universe that can ultimately take away anything eternal from me. I have held securely in the hand of Jesus and even if this day ends at death's door I know I don't have to go through it alone. In fact, I get to go through it with the only One Who has ever gone through that door and come back out to stay for good.

So ask. Ask for God's power to be unleashed in your life. If you're not sure what to ask for just ask Him to do something GREAT in your life. Maybe something that's never been done before and let Him get creative. Ask for God's presence in your life because without a growing faith where you get into the yoke with Jesus and let Him set the pace, direction, pit-stops and destination of your life you will never experience the life He created you to live. And then ask

for His protection as you go through this world. I don't know exactly what it will lead to in your life but I know this- it will lead to something beyond your wildest dreams. Because God is a God who loves to shower us with outrageous and unexpected generosity and grace in spite of the waves of trouble and pain that this world inevitably bring to the shores of our lives:

And God granted him his request. 1 Chronicles 4:10 (NLT)

Friday:

Mordecai gave Hathach a copy of the decree issued in Susa that called for the death of all Jews. He asked Hathach to show it to Esther and explain the situation to her. He also asked Hathach to direct her to go to the king to beg for mercy and plead for her people. So Hathach returned to Esther with Mordecai's message. Then Esther told Hathach to go back and relay this message to Mordecai: "All the king's officials and even the people in the provinces know that anyone who appears before the king in his inner court without being invited is doomed to die unless the king holds out his gold scepter. And the king has not called for me to come to him for thirty days." So Hathach gave Esther's message to Mordecai. Mordecai sent this reply to Esther: "Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?" Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go and gather together all the Jews of Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will do the same. And then, though it is against the law, I will go in to see the king. If I must die, I must die." Esther 4:8-16 (NLT)

Reflection: The Chinese have a curse, "may you live in interesting times." Do you ever feel like you are living in "interesting" times? Like, oh I don't know... maybe right now? It's not unusual for us to feel like we are in over our heads with the circumstances that surround us- especially during Covid. We all long for the easy path and quiet days. We pray for them every day (at least I do). But Jesus promised us that as long as we're in this world we **will** have troubles.

I told you these things so that you can have peace in me. In this world you will have trouble, but be brave! I have defeated the world. John 16:33 (NCV)

Joyce Meyers says, all Christians want a testimony... but when we get to the test usually all that's left in us is the moanies.

Life gives us tests and troubles... we don't get to choose whether or not tough times will come our way. But we do have the last word on how we'll handle them, and how we handle the tough times not only says a lot about who we are and who we are going to become. It also will determine your legacy. Do you remember what Mordecai said to Esther?

Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?

Because each of us leaves behind a story. What story could your life tell if you were infused by the power of God despite these “interesting” times. Who knows if you (like Queen Esther) were born for just such a time as this?

Prayer: Father, forgive me for letting my circumstances define me and the direction of my life. Give me the grace I need to choose this day how I will respond to the interesting times that come my way. Lead me to live my life today in a way that will leave a legacy that I can be proud of.