

Identifying Signs

Assumptions and definitions – we all rely on them, often assume that ours is the true one, and quite frequently forget that they differ, that they change and shape our reality, our actions and our interactions. Assumptions and definitions also greatly impact our understanding and relationship with God. They are easy to “buy into” without much thought and can offer us opportunities to grow in faith and grace when we ask the Spirit to illuminate where ours might be hindering our growing in faith and relationships.

This wonderful little passage, often referred to as “The Prayer of Jabez” provides a wonderful doorway for such Spirit filled contemplation. It has been pulled from a tracing of a family’s heritage and highlighted, expounded upon and explained - a wonderful and wicked thing. Wonderful as is any consideration and lifting up of God’s written word, all of Scripture is God inspired and contains the great truth, the truth of the nature of humanity, of God and of God’s interaction, care and love. Wicked in that some have heard assumption and scholarly supposition as fact, some have taken this from the status of a good prayer to “the right prayer”, and others have defined blessing and the promise of this prayer to be close to getting God to do as we bid.

The first assumption often made is that “and God answered his prayers” is equal to saying that Jabez got all that he asked for. There is freedom gained and given to God when we examine the release this assumption and grasp the understanding that God answers all prayers. Scripture does not tell us, nor is there anyway to know, if Jabez indeed increased his land holdings, or he did or did not cause or experience pain. We don’t know and aren’t told how whatever answers Jabez received impacted others, for no one gains land without someone else losing or how praying this prayer changed Jabez’s heart, understanding or desires. What we do know is that as God promises, prayer was answered, answered in the way God saw as good.

Prayer; understanding and attempting to grasp a bit of this Creator and creature connection, accepting that it may be like but is not the same as anything of or in this world, is a vital aspect of faithful living. For the ways that this passage has increased the willingness of the creatures to engage with it and meet God in prayer I celebrate and pray the spirit will continue to be invited into lives and hearts. For the ways that this passage and other teachings of the church and believers have lessened prayer to be seen as a tool for controlling God, or as something that is only answered when we get our way, or for the ways that the Spirit is sometimes wrung out, when we see prayer as something we can get, master and have a handle on, I offer a prayer of confession and repentance on behalf of the creatures and hope that more and more will remember that the God who meets us in prayer is always near and beyond us, always known and mystery, always God, and God alone.

Bringing this same mixture of Creator and creature, of God and humanity, into our definition of blessing opens the next doorway I wish to walk through with you today. We cannot fully understand what even the word “bless” means, as it is a mixture of God and humanity, we can experience it, we can know we have and can receive it, we can believe in and seek blessing, but human words cannot fully define it. When we attempt to do so, we lessen it until it becomes something totally different, totally human.

For many the first thing that comes to mind when hearing the word blessing is health, we equate being blessed with having good health. This is followed closely by wealth, be material goods, by "the good life". Defining blessing in this way is easy, until life hits a bump, until sickness comes, and it always will, until we either feel that we are lacking or when all the "things" we have bring an emptiness as the gathering, caring for and protecting of them become the center of our lives. Those are the intersections which call us to either examine our understanding of being blessed or to question our relationship or the goodness of God.

In Jabez's prayer, the request to be blessed is the first thing asked for, to gain land was the second and separate request; they are not connected or related. In my biblical imagination I wonder if once Jabez truly experienced and embraced his life as being blessed by God, the other desires named faded from his mind. Could that be possible, that as one prays day by day, what we ask for might change, that we might find that God and God alone is all we desire? I believe, and sincerely hope, and have experienced in part, that after months or years of prayers, the prayer finds a contentment that is not based on anything of this world. What are the identifying marks of a life blessed by God, are they something we can know, something we can see? Again, I believe so, though I don't think we begin to until we sweep away the clutter of selfishness from our definition of blessing.

The definition of the Hebrew word translated as blessing when ascribed to God is simple, and I believe it emphasizes the strongest identifying mark. In Hebrew this word means to be brought to the knees. To ask for God to bless us is to ask God to bring us to our knees. This may happen as an act of praise, awe and worship when we open our hearts to God. This may happen when we allow the situations and circumstances of life to weigh so heavy upon us that we drop to our knees from the weight and in acknowledgement of our need for God. When we are brought and kept on our knees, not just literally but figurative in our hearts before God, it shows. It shows to the kneeler, we know what posture we've assumed and how that posture directs our eyes and enables our bodies. It shows to others, when a life is lived knelt before God, God shows in and through that life. When a life is lived knelt before God, there is humility, acceptance, wisdom, joy (with a little j), contentment and all the fruits of the spirit which Paul names so clearly visible, tangible, bring peace and power.

When a life is spent knelt before God, there is hope, trust and faith in sickness and health, is wealth and in poverty. This is the life that others look to in difficult times and perhaps mock in good times, this is the life that challenges and comforts, the life that draws others near yet can repel as the cost is so dear. The cost is nothing less than the surrender of self, the kneeling before God. Yet the cost cannot compare to the blessings it brings, the blessings that do indeed show, the blessing of God.

Like Jabez I pray earnestly for God's blessing, and as your pastor I pray that for you, for us, and for all who God will bring into our community. May we have bruised, battered and worn out knees! May we know what it means to be blessed so that we may be a true blessing, a blessing in God's name and in the image of Christ, for all of the world!