

A Selfish Prayer?

*"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."
1 Chronicles 4:10 (NIV)*

Almost nothing is known of the man Jabez who is named in our verse for today. Evidently he believed in prayer and sought to use it for his own benefit. Oceans of comment have been poured into this thimble of a verse.

One of his requests intrigues me greatly because I have prayed for the same thing often enough. Jabez wanted to avoid "harm" so that he would live "free from pain". I am all for living pain free and my use of painkillers for migraine headaches and other painful medical issues will attest to the concern I have to be free from pain whenever possible.

However, I have lived long enough to know that pain is not the mortal enemy we in the western world think it to be. My several occurrences of cancer were relatively pain free. Had the disease come with pain I might have been spared some significant inconvenience. Also, my times of suffering the blinding pain of migraines did more to help me pray than all the sermons I ever heard on prayer.

I think we sometimes fear pain

a little too much in our modern western society. We have a little pain and we want an instant cure for it. We cannot abide the notion that pain is a helpful friend at times rather than the horrible enemy of the good life we seek to live.

If you really want to talk to a genuine saint I suggest you look for someone who has suffered much in life. Those are the people who have been refined and have come out like pure gold. The individuals who have had pain free lives, and especially those who have known nothing of suffering, are often the very people whose personal lives are distorted and morally ugly.

Think of the entertainer or heir to the family fortune, who have all their hearts could desire, and you will likely be thinking of people who are ruined by their relatively easy existence. It is usually through adversity that we grow into the kinds of people the Lord will use greatly.

Like Jabez, I too have "cried out to the God of Israel" for freedom from harm and pain. But my greatest spurts of spiritual

growth, my closest intimacy with my Creator have been in those seasons when the pain was greatest. Only in one especially painful time in my life did I pray like Job in chapter 3 of his great biography. And, like Job, the Lord did not give me what I wanted at the time.

As I reflect on my own suffering in life I can honestly say with the Psalmist concerning all of it Psalm 119:71 (KJV). "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn..." Ironically in life the best lessons have to be learned in the school of hard knocks.

So, like Jabez, and—like most if not all of God's people—we pray for deliverance from the pain and suffering that seems so prevalent around us. Yet, after the storm has passed, we look back and recognize we have become better people for the suffering we sought to avoid. May you and I have patience to endure suffering because we see Him Who is invisible (Hebrews 11:27).

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