

## A precious prayer

*bij Egbert Brink*

*Jabes was esteemed amongst his brothers. Yet his mother had named him Jabes, because, she said, 'I gave birth to him in pain.' Jabes 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.' God gave him what he asked for.*

*(1 Chronicles 4:9-10)*

**Success guaranteed! 'As long as you pray passionately enough, God will give you what you ask for'. Jabes' prayer has been used in all manner of ways to preach a prosperity gospel, from America to Africa and also in Europe.**

It is claimed that the problem is not God's willingness to answer our prayers but our lack of praying expectantly; our lacking the courage to ask him. God, it is then said, would love to give us everything, had we but paid for it with passion.

### Wretched one

Imagine being called Jabes. It is not a name to cheer you up. It most likely meaning is something like 'misery, wretched one'. Something that brings you pain and trouble and causes distress. Who would give his child such a name? What drove his mother to do this? She herself says it is because she had such a difficult childbirth, a delivery that came with great pain and suffering. Many women can relate to this and have cried out 'Never again!' during labour. Often this feeling subsides once they hold the child in their arms. Already in Paradise God had said to Eve: "I will make your pains in childbearing very severe; with painful labor you will give birth to children. (Genesis 3:16)

The mother had just lived through this, but still there seems to be more going on. She wants the wretchedness put on record in the name Jabes. Perhaps more went wrong during that time. Did she die in childbirth? For she is not the only one to give her child such a sombre name. Mother Rachel had also done this when her second son was being born. She herself did not survive to see it and enjoy her son. She died of misery. Bitter and inconsolable as she was, she named her child 'ben-oni', son of misery, wretched one. Jacob overruled her and called his child Ben-jamin, child of joy. You are welcome, sweet child!

Yet here there is no father to be found, no father to say: I shall not give my child such a name. The mother is in an extremely negative mood. She places a stamp on her boy with her negative impressions - as if her negative experiences at the beginning of his life had the right to determine the course of the rest of it. What it does express is lack of faith and little or no faith in the future.

### Comfort among the ruins

Before we judge too harshly, we must bear in mind that her life circumstances were not the most cheerful. She lived in the period of the judges! Reading about those times doesn't make you happy. Continuous famines, ghastly excesses and tribal wars ran rampant. 'Everyone did as they saw fit'. Strong individualism reigned: everybody for himself. That becomes a disintegrating force. There are continuous attacks from outside, the people's dwelling space is uncertain, expanding their territory is out of the question as the tribes of Israel have been too slack. They have adapted more and more to the world around them. There is an atmosphere of: what is to become of us? This could well have left its mark on this mother of Israel. The surrounding circumstances do not work in her favour. She sees everything in dark and sombre perspective. We see a bitter woman, who expresses her despair in the name of her son. (cf 1 Sam. 4:21).

The author of Chronicles did not shy away from mentioning the name Jabes in a list of descendants. Apparently he wished to comfort his readers who were in the same situation. Some had returned from exile and their homeland lay in ruins. Who can rebuild with such a minority? Where to start? We can relate to that initial feeling: it will never again be what it once was.

### **I am available**

Jabes is not one to throw in the towel. He will not reconcile himself with the fact that his mother gave him this name. He is not passive, dully accepting his fate. He starts his prayer by addressing the 'God of Israel'. Jacob had received the name Israel when he had wrestled with his God. Jabes appeals to this God who has time and again proved to be there for his people, who has saved them in numerous situations. How often had they not thought that nothing was to become of them? And how often had not others written Israel off as a lost cause?

Jabes casts off the feeling of doom by praying passionately. Remarkably enough, Jabes uses the formula of a vow: 'If you do this, then I will do that,' in the same way that Hannah did: 'if you give me a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.' That is not an attempt at coercion but an open-hearted way of insisting, a powerful appeal. The strange thing is that Jabes does not fill in what his plans are! He suffices with: '*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 then? He does not fill in the rest. He leaves that to God to determine. He places himself completely at God's disposal, completely available for what God has planned.

### **Territorial expansion as a blessing?**

The most foremost in this prayer is: *bless me*. One could think of prosperity and affluence. Is not Jabes praying for enlargement of what he owns? To obtain a larger piece of land, to become richer, to be successful? However, one must position that territorial expansion in the period of the judges. God had divided the land amongst Israel. Each tribe had been allocated a part. That piece of land was destined for them; exactly as Joshua had divided and allocated it. Yet many had not gone to the trouble of claiming that land. They no longer wanted to be involved in driving away the Canaanites. With all the sorry consequences, for these people who were hostile to God formed a threat on religious and ethical terrains. God had announced that this people were going to have a hard time of it should the Canaanites remain. And that is what happened, because they tempted their children to join in their life without God! They

had been slack, had thrown in the towel, as discouraged as they were. That was the way of it in the days of the judges.

Comparable to the period following the exile – the times in which Chronicles was written – when the Israelites returned to the promised land and stood among the ruins of what once was. That can have a paralysing effect: can we turn the tide? Why make the effort, if nobody is listening? If we are with so few?

Jabes is not just praying for a large piece of land and a life of luxury. He is making a strong plea to be granted the land God had promised him. He is keeping God to that promise. He is not in a negative mood, discouraged or desperate. He seeks his security in God. And goes even further: *let your hand be with me*. Keep evil from me, keep it at a distance. Do not allow it to harm me and get the better of me. Setbacks, opposition, being cut loose from God, being threatened; that is his greatest concern. He prays for protection from this, calling upon the high name: God of Israel.

### **Big-hearted answer**

God answered Jabes prayer and simply did what he had asked for. Apparently he can be swayed by prayer. Jabes became the most honoured among his brothers. He has become a man held in high esteem. Look at what he has received! That is what now has become of that ‘wretched one’. He received the expansion of the territory that had been promised him. And he started doing well. His bad luck had been warded off. Jabes received all the room he needed, literally and figuratively. His prayer is a jewel, that has high expectations of God. A prayer that cuts through all the negativism, discouragement and pessimism. Do not underestimate the power of prayer if God wants to involve you in his plans.

If you listen carefully to Jabes’ prayer, it is not a prayer for success, a prayer for more and more. As if God is dependant upon our wishes, if he wants to answer them. It is a touching prayer, in which somebody makes a strong appeal to God and makes himself available to God. A mighty weapon against such doom-thinking as ‘it will never work, it is doomed to fail’.

Jesus did not only acquire a piece of land for us, his Christians, to inherit. A whole new world has been laid aside for his followers (Matt 5:5 and Rom 4:13). That expansion of territory has been promised, there is our ultimate dwellingplace. The promised land for Jabes was no more and no less than an advance loan on this inheritance. After Christ’s coming that promised land is the new earth, which is why the prayer for God’s Kingdom has priority. The power of prayer is great if you – in view of the coming of his kingdom – place yourself at God’s disposal and make yourself available. He can give you more than you could ever imagine. But you will come to see that it is never just success or happiness, separate from God. ‘If you bless us’ is in fact: ‘God, will you go with us? Will you deliver us from this negative spiral’. If he did not spare his only son but offered him as a ‘wretched one’, would he not grant us all things in him? All things, that is, except that which would pull us away from him. That is true blessing, because *his grace, the fact that he goes with us, is stronger than everything that is against us*.