

Article: DP805

THE PRAYER OF JABEZ OR THE PRAYER OF JESUS?

This article first appeared in the Practical Apologetics column of the *Christian Research Journal*, volume 24, number 3 (2001). For further information or to subscribe to the *Christian Research Journal* go to: <http://www.equip.org>

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, He might have responded by pointing them to the prayers of Joshua, Jephthah, or, yes, Jabez; but He didn't. Jesus knew that His disciples would never properly understand *examples* of prayer, if they did not first understand the *principles* of prayer; and that's exactly why He gave them the prayer of Jesus. The Lord did not give them a prayer *mantra*; He gave them a prayer *manner*.

Drawing unwarranted inferences from what a biblical character did, thought, or even prayed is an exceedingly dangerous practice. This applies not only to Jabez (1 Chron. 4:9–10), but, incredible as it may seem, it applies to Jesus as well! I love the way eminent theologian and Bible teacher R. C. Sproul drives home this point:

Can we really construct a manual of required Christian behavior purely on the basis of an analysis of what Jesus did? So often when a Christian is faced with a problematic situation, he is told to ask himself, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" That is not always a wise question to ask. A better question would be, "What would Jesus have me do in this situation?"

Why is it dangerous to simply try to model our lives after what Jesus did? If we try to model our lives precisely according to Jesus' example, we may get into trouble on several counts. First of all, our tasks as obedient children to God are not exactly the same as Jesus' mission. I was not sent into this world to save men from their sins. I can never speak with absolute authority about anything like Jesus did. I cannot go into the church with a whip and drive the corrupt clergymen out. I am not the Lord of the Church.¹

The danger in reading too much into a brief narrative on prayer is that we may make far more out of it than is warranted. This is primarily because the only resource we have to elucidate such narratives is personal success stories. We can thus fall into the trap of reading our own ideas into Scripture rather than allowing Scripture to speak for itself.

Perhaps a biblical example will help to illustrate this point. Remember the prayer of Jephthah? It's an almost incredible story. Jephthah prayed that God would allow him to defeat the Ammonites in battle. He made what some would consider a rash vow: "Whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the Lord's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:31). Well, guess what happened. The good news is that God answered Jephthah's prayer and delivered the Ammonites into his hands. The bad news is that his daughter was the first to come out of the door of his house to greet him. Talk about snatching defeat out of the jaws of victory! Sure, he had defeated the Ammonites, but now it seemed that he would have to send his only daughter to a fiery grave.

Is that really what this narrative is saying? Unlike the narrative on Jabez, there's more to this story. The rest of Scripture contextualizes the prayer of Jephthah. In fact, Hebrews 11 places Jephthah squarely in the faith hall of fame. We may thus conclude that Jephthah would not have compounded one sin, namely, making a rash vow, by the far more egregious sin of making a human sacrifice.

As a judge of Israel, he knew full well that God had forbidden such an abominable practice. Trust me, the words of the Lord were not lost on Jephthah. They rang down through the corridor of time with a

crushing crescendo: “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire” (Deut. 18:9–10).

A complete reading of this biblical narrative makes it crystal clear that Jephthah did not incinerate his only daughter as *a literal sacrifice*. He rather offered his daughter to the Lord in what Paul refers to in Romans 12:1 as *a living sacrifice*. Offering up his daughter as a burnt offering was a figurative way of saying that for the rest of her life she would be dedicated to the Lord in temple service and perpetual virginity. Jephthah’s daughter did not go out and mourn her impending death; she mourned her perpetual virginity. As Scripture puts it, she and her friends roamed the hills and wept, “because she would never marry” (Judg. 11:38).²

Can you see how Jephthah’s prayer takes on an entirely different perspective when the rest of the Bible contextualizes it? That is precisely why biblical accounts of prayers must always be interpreted in light of scriptural principles. This is particularly true when it comes to Jabez. Putting too much weight on a one-sentence prayer that is never expanded upon elsewhere in Scripture is fraught with dangers; not the least of which is reading personal biases into Scripture.

– Hank Hanegraaff

NOTES

1. R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 71.
2. The fact that commentaries struggle to interpret this passage further highlights the truth that a cloudy narrative of Scripture should always be interpreted in light of clear passages.