

The Prayer of Jabez falls short in Africa

by David Batstone

Bruce Wilkinson, author of the best-selling book *The Prayer of Jabez*, made a big splash nearly four years ago when he announced his ambitious plan to help children suffering from AIDS in Africa.

Not everything for Wilkinson has gone according to plan, unfortunately. A page one feature in the Dec. 19 *The Wall Street Journal* captures the sad tale in a nutshell: “In 2002 Bruce Wilkinson, a Georgia preacher whose self-help prayer book had made him a rich man, heard God’s call, moved to Africa and announced his intention to save one million children left orphaned by the AIDS epidemic. In October [2005], Wilkinson resigned in a huff from the African charity he founded. He abandoned his plan to house 10,000 children in a facility that was to be an orphanage, bed-and-breakfast, game reserve, Bible college, industrial park and Disneyesque tourist destination in the tiny kingdom of Swaziland. What happened in between is a story of grand hopes and inexperience, divine inspiration and human foibles. [H]is departure left critics convinced he was just another in a long parade of outsiders who have come to Africa making big promises and quit the continent when local people didn’t bend to their will.”

It is not my aim to gloat at Wilkinson’s failure. To the contrary, I mourn what this means for the millions of African children in crisis who apparently will not benefit from his efforts. I also want to honor Wilkinson’s desire to help the least fortunate. It would have been easy for him to take the wealth he gained from his book sales and live a life of personal comfort.

This chain of events, however, should not pass without a moment of theological reflection. The “blessed life” that Wilkinson has helped to promote carries with it a number of assumptions about where God is present in the world, and how God acts in response to the prayers of the faithful.

The Prayer of Jabez is based on a passage out of the book of Chronicles, in which a devoted man named Jabez asks God for a favor: “Oh that you would bless me and enlarge my border, and that your hand might be with me, and that you would keep me from hurt and harm!” The fact that God honors Jabez’ prayer and blesses him with great riches indicates to Wilkinson a God-principle. If we in pure heart ask God for a blessing – and do so using the very words that Jabez prayed – then God will bring wondrous gifts into our life. As *The Wall Street Journal* reports, Wilkinson interprets the wild commercial success of his books (roughly 20 million copies sold combined) as yet another proof of the miraculous power of the Jabez prayer. In other words, it worked for Jabez, it worked for Wilkinson, and now it should work for you. With the fiasco in Africa now behind him – and the full Journal report makes clear that fiasco is the appropriate term – I wonder if Wilkinson has reconsidered his theology.

Maybe because I spent so many years in poor regions of the globe I could never accept the prayer-in-blessing-out approach to faithful living. Straight to the point, I have known too many devoted Christians for whom life did not bring them material blessing. Their children still died of infectious diseases that plagued their village. They could not avoid the violence that dictators and ideologues so often use to cow the powerless. Their territory did not expand because their only

path for survival was a daily labor with their hands. Yet they did not lose faith, or cease praying for God's blessing.

As I ponder on their lives, I find a more fitting theology for God's presence and action in the world to be laid out in the book of Hebrews. There we are encouraged to have "faith in things not yet seen," and are offered models of individuals who tried to lead devoted lives that honor God. We read that some of them did receive great material blessings, while others ended up in the dens of lions or stoned due to their principled living. We learn, in other words, that God does hear their prayers and loves them profoundly, but it does not always bring them material riches or expanded territory.

Wilkinson's doctrine in fact implies that social structures are immaterial. An individual reciting the right prayer can transcend an AIDS epidemic in his or her village or escape being bought and sold into slavery (like 27 million people on this planet yet today). Perhaps now that Wilkinson has immersed himself in Africa, he better understands that the curse of poverty is not a spiritual punishment, or an indication of a lack of faith. To bring blessings to the orphans and widows of Africa, a dramatic shift in values – political, economic, and personal – will be required. And that challenge cannot be owned by Africans alone; it falls squarely on the shoulders of us in rich nations, who enjoy such great material "blessings."

Just like the next Bible reader, I could pick out individual passages that seem to suggest that God will give us whatever we desire as long as we ask for it with a pure heart. "You can even move this mountain" with such a prayer, as Jesus teaches his disciples in the gospels. I do not summarily discount these passages, nor do I assume that we should never pray for rain in a time of drought.

But the weight of the biblical message balances heavily toward a prayer life that yields courage, love, and compassion to do the will of God. The expectation of material gain and miraculous blessings may even distract us on that pilgrimage. The passage in Hebrews calls us, based on past heroes of the faith, "to run the race in front of us," confident that devoting our lives to God's work is all the reward we will ever need.