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PEN PORTRAITS FROM OLD RECORDS

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1 Chronicles 1:9

In the midst of these lists of names there are found most delightful little sketches of men who lived so long ago, but, because of certain characteristics which caught the imagination of the compiler of these records, they have had their stories handed down from generation to generation, inspiring others to new endeavour and helping others to find the way which darkness had seemed to obscure.

In reading the Holy Book, if, when we come to these lists of names we lightly pass them over, feeling there can be little of spiritual value for us there, we shall miss some rare and much helpful instruction.

I. Jabez

In 1 Chron. 4:9, 10, we have the story of Jabez, whose name means 'sorrowing', who turned such sorrow to good account, climbing by means of it to heights of honour and spiritual power.

We might notice three aspects of this man: He is

1. *A Man with a Record*: 'He was more honourable than his brethren'. Of his general nature and of his business in life, we know practically nothing. But out of the sorrow that surrounded his birth he apparently grew to manhood sharing in the tasks and problems of life such as befell most men. It is mainly as men act in and react to the ordinary circumstances of life that character is developed and differences between men are seen.

In what way this man was more honourable than his brethren is not directly disclosed, simply the fact is stated. It may have been in his family life where, in his relations to his parents or to the concerns of the family inheritance, he proved to be the more honourable; or, it may have been in public relations, in trading affairs, or in the faithful discharge of normal duties that he proved more honourable than his brethren. We cannot say more than that it was fully recognized and faithfully recorded that he merited this honourable mention.

Does not this convey a message to ourselves? Paul, in Rom. 12:17. (R.V.), says, 'Take thought for things honourable in the sight of all men'; or better, 'Take thought beforehand'; there is to be a diligent consideration of these matters presented to us, an earnest search as to whether we should choose them, embrace them and make them the guiding principles of our conduct, or reject them, refusing their proffered advantages. In choosing things which are honourable we shall find that they are possessed of 'beauty as an outward sign of their good, noble, honourable character' which they bear. (Soutter).

'Whatsoever things are . . . honourable . . . think on these things', (Phil. 4:8). Here the word used means 'grave, worthy of respect'. Our thought life is to be concerned with worthy things, rather than with the worthless things which so often are presented to the minds of men for their supposed profit or entertainment.

The brethren of Jabez did not come up to his high standard: do we?

2. *A Man with a Request:* He was a man of Prayer. Three elements emerge here: (a) He knew his God—He called upon God, there was no hesitancy in the matter; definitely and deliberately he came with his requests believing that God would hear and answer. He called on God as the God of Israel, the God Who was in a peculiar way intimately connected with the nation and fully covenanted to hear the cries of His people. He called on God. Evidently this was not the first time he had done so, and experiences of blessing in the past encouraged him to come and ask anew. He called on God, realizing that such help as he needed could alone come from God in Whose hands all things were.

Evidently there are principles here which may guide the believer in his prayer life. He may be conscious of Who God is because of his former experiences of answered prayer, and of the fact that God is able to do for him above that which he asks or thinks.

(b) He was bold with his requests. He came to a great God Who was also a great Giver, therefore he did not make trifling

requests nor ask for small benefits. Too often it seems as if we measure God as a giver by the smallness of our own giving to them that ask from us.

He asks for (i) *Blessing*—It is well to seek the blessing of God, and to seek it with an urgency such as we detect in this prayer of Jabez. There is no halfheartedness in the framing of his requests: it comes with a spontaneity, with a directness, with an urgency, from his heart. Here too, may we note the qualities that should characterize all our prayers.

(ii) *Enlargement* . . . 'And enlarge my border'. His present place was too narrow, and his precincts too confined. He needed more room, perhaps for his growing family, or for his business concerns, and so he seeks this enlargement of God.

The believer is in constant need of spiritual enlargement. He needs to grow and develop himself; he needs to widen his sphere of spiritual influence; he needs to trade in the interests of his Master in ever larger scope and with greater intensity. Let us not remain cramped in our spheres of Christian service, nor confined as to our methods of performing that service.

(iii) *Help*—'that Thine hand might be with me.' God's hand was ever ready to help, but he seems to request that it should ever be with *him*, bringing to him that timely aid that would enable him to achieve those ends he purposed. Without such aid his own endeavours would not succeed; he would but flounder helplessly in the mass of circumstances that would block his way. If we in our day would find help, we may seek that Throne of Grace where we may find help in time of need, and if we find opposition blocking our path, we may seek His help and boldly say 'The Lord is our Helper'.

(iv) *Preservation*—'that Thou wouldst keep me from evil.' There are still dangers lurking in the shades seeking to bring about his downfall. He needs to be kept from these evil influences, from evil practices and from evil persons. Well might Jesus teach His disciples to pray, 'Deliver us from evil'. Never was it more needful to pray this prayer than it is today, when the envioning forces of evil are so numerous and so powerful,

There is need to be kept from its presence, its power and its penalty.

(c) He stated his Purpose . . . 'that it be not to my sorrow' (R.V.) He fully realized that evil works out to sorrow and he desires to avoid this. But again, his only resource is in God and to Him he comes with assurance of the help for which he prays. Well may we seek to be delivered from the sorrow and grief that evil brings in its train! And for this our help cometh from the Lord.

3. *A Man with a Richness.* 'God granted him that which he requested'. There was a largeness in God's giving to match the largeness of his asking. He became rich with God's blessings, enlargement and help, and was preserved from evil.

Paul speaks of the believer as being 'enriched in Christ'. The wealth of God's Grace, of His Gifts, and of His Goodness are at our disposal. But we must come and ask as Jabez did. We must come into that knowledge of God in all His covenant grace and loving goodness and so realize that we may ask with confidence and 'be assured that it shall be given us'. We must come into that fellowship with God in Christ whereby we know that in our asking we are in harmony with Him and that our wills are in alignment with His will and that in consequence our request is assured of a blessed response.

Such a blessed God makes His people rich as He pours upon them the plenitude of His blessings.

Quarles used to sing:

Man's plea to Man is that he never more
Will beg, and that he never begged before.
Man's plea to God is that he did obtain
A former suit, and therefore sues again.
Oh! what a blessed God is ours, Who, when we sue,
Makes His old Gifts the examples of His new.
