

PEBBLES ON THE BEACH

(My version of the Jabez story)

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Introduction

The Old Testament book of First Chronicles is dull reading. Here's how the opening chapter begins:

Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jaren
Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah, Shem,
Ham, and Japheth.

The rest of the chapter is exactly the same – just a list of names. Nothing else. Just names. Two hundred of them! The second chapter is much the same. Here is how it starts:

These are the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon,
Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Joseph,
Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.

And it continues on through the rest of the chapter. Just names. Another two hundred of them.

The same with the third chapter – and the fourth – and the fifth, and the sixth – all the way through the ninth chapter.

Several thousand names. Only names. What could be the meaning of this? What are we supposed to learn from this? It reminds us of the words of King David who said, “When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou has established: What is man, that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou dost care for him?”

All of the names recorded in the first nine chapters of First Chronicles identify men and women who were born, grew up, got married, had children, worked at a job, played with their grandchildren, retired, grew old, and died.

That's all we know about them. Nothing special. They are just pebbles on the beach – indistinguishable from one another.

With one exception. A single exception. And that exception is the man Jabez. We read about him in Chapter 4, verses 9 and 10. Right in the middle of this long, long list of names we read these words:

“Jabez was more honorable than his brothers: and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ And Jabez called on the God of Israel, saying, ‘Oh, that thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my borders, and that thy hand might be with me, and that thou wouldst keep me from harm, so that it might not hurt me!’ And God granted what he requested.”

Now this is amazing! Out of hundreds, even thousands, of names, we are given information about only one. Only one.

Obviously, therefore, God wants us to focus on this one. He wants us to learn something from this one. All these other chapters – all these other names – are just the setting in which we contemplate this jewel.

What, then, can we learn from Jabez?

I. Is it Okay to Be Ambitious?

The first thing we notice from our text is Jabez' ambition – his desire to be significant, to make something of himself. “Oh, that thou wouldst bless me indeed, and enlarge my borders,” he prays.

Jabez was not content to be just another pebble on the beach. He yearned to stand out. He wanted his life to make a difference.

Jabez did not want to be just another name in a long list of people who were born, grew up, got married, had children, worked at a job, played with their grandchildren, retired, grew old, and died.

There are about five million people in the world today. That means that about 140 million were born the same year you were. Four hundred thousand have the same birthday that you have. And 300 were actually born the very same moment you were.

How can you distinguish yourself from among this mass? Or should you even be thinking about that?

If it is true, as the book of James says, that we are just “a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes,” perhaps we should be content to be mediocre – to simply live out our days.

But no! For our text tells us that God approved of Jabez' attitude. Jabez prayed his prayer, that God would bless and prosper him, and the text says simply: “God granted him what he asked.”

Just like that! No argument. No attempt on God's part to persuade Jabez that he was being a bit presumptuous – that he should not try to be different – that he should just settle down and be like everyone else.

On the contrary. God must have felt, as England's great prime minister, Disraeli, felt when he exclaimed, “Life is too short to be little!”

Note well the simplicity of God's response. It is proof that God approves of the yearning to be, as the Army's recruiting slogan has it, “all that we can be.”

II. What Do We Mean by Being Significant?

If it is true that God approves our innate desire to be significant, what exactly do we mean by being significant?

The world has its own ideas. To be significant is to have lots of money. J. Paul Getty is significant. To be significant is to exercise power – to hold impressive degrees – to wear designer clothes – to live in the right neighborhood – to be number one on the charts – to own a Mercedes.

But the truly significant person, from a Christian perspective, is not the richest person, the strongest person, the most educated person, or even the most talented person.

The truly significant person, from God's point of view, is one who makes a difference – a positive difference – in the lives of others.

As my father once told me, "A person's life is not measured by its duration but by its donation."

That's why good mothers are significant persons. That's why good fathers are, too. They constantly put the welfare of others, especially their children, ahead of their own. Their daily actions are all designed to make a difference in the lives of their children.

From a biblical point of view, J. Paul Getty's significance does not lie in his wealth, though he is the wealthiest man in the world this year, but in how he got his wealth, and what he does with his wealth.

True significance doesn't derive from living in a certain neighborhood, but in what one contributes to other neighborhoods. True significance doesn't come from sheer power, but from what one does on behalf of others with that power.

I'm not sure Jabez understood this clearly. Certainly now when he prayed his prayer. Perhaps later in life. But his prayer as we have it here is very egocentric:

"Oh, that thou wouldst bless ME, and enlarge MY borders, and that they hand might be with ME," etc.

III. How Does One Achieve Genuine Significance?

We have already come close to answering this question, at least in part, insofar as we have been talking about service to others.

This is where the words of Jesus are so helpful. Jesus said, "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

That is to say, not even the smallest, most ordinary act of kindness toward another person, in the name of Jesus, goes unnoticed by God.

You may think of yourself as an ordinary person, but your acts have extraordinary significance in the sight of God, and your acts give your life significance. On another occasion Jesus said to his followers:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave: even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Each one of us seems ourself as the center of a universe. We are born with a *centripetal* impulse to relate everything and everyone to ourselves, and to seek our own interests. What we need to cultivate, as Christians, is the *centrifugal* impulse that comes from Jesus Christ – that is, the impulse that moves us to think in terms of others. That is why the apostle Paul said,

“Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interest of others” (Philippians 2:4).

So in general terms we can say that if we want our lives to be out of the ordinary, to be extraordinary, we will want to follow Jesus’ example and serve others.

But there is one more angle to consider. Just before he was executed at Calvary for the sins of the world, Jesus himself prayed a prayer. In his prayer he said,

“Father, I have glorified thee on earth [that is, I know my life has been truly significant] – having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do” (John 17:4).

To be genuinely significant we cannot excel at just *anything*; we must find the one thing God wants us to do, and then to *that* things very well.

There is something in this world that God wants done that can only be done by you. It has your name on it. It is your assignment.

To be genuinely significant is to have carved on our tombstone when we die, “He accomplished the work God gave him to do” or “She accomplished the work God gave her to do.”

How do we discover what work God wants us to do? Well, we study the Bible to find out just what God is trying to accomplish in this world in a general way.

Then we study the arena in which God has placed us to discern its special needs and prospects.

Then we study our own personal gifts and talents. We may need to get some help from our friends and colleagues for this.

Finally, and prayerfully, we begin to exercise our gifts and talents in some specific ministry – whether than be at home or at school or at work.

In this fashion God carves out a role for us to play on the stage of life that no one else can play. It may appear outwardly to be a minor role. Never mind. In God’s eyes it is an essential role – and that makes it significant. It makes you significant.