

## Does god always Bless Believers?

The answer to that question may depend on how you define blessing. The excesses represented by those preaching a “health and wealth” gospel make many believers cautious about asking for blessing. Yet Scripture frequently attests to God’s desire to bless his people. In this study, we will consider the concept of “good success”—how God blesses the people he uses.

### Scripture:

1 Chronicles 4:9–10;

Joshua 1:8;

Psalm 73;

Matthew 5:5; 6:19–24;

Luke 18:18–25

Based on: “Unbalanced Blessings,”

### Part 1 identify the current issue

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jer. 29:11). This verse has been quoted and claimed almost more than any other in Scripture. But who was the Lord referring to and what was its original intent?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] To whom was this verse written? When and why?

[Q] If this verse was written to a nation, how does it apply to individuals?

[Q] What does this verse teach us about the character of God?

[Q] What does this verse teach us about the trustworthiness of God?

[Q] In this verse, what is God’s perspective in relation to time? How is that comforting or challenging?

[Q] Does this verse represent God’s plan for all people of all time? Can you think of exceptions, when God’s plan was for people to suffer?

[Q] How do we understand this verse next to Jesus’ statement that the life of discipleship is the taking up of the cross, a life of self-denial and even suffering at times?

[Q] Make a list of recent blessings. Who is responsible for them? Pick one that is obviously a blessing from God, for which no human could claim credit. How did that blessing also bless others?

### Part 2 discover the eternal principles

**Teaching Point one:** God blesses whom he chooses.

A decade ago, The Prayer of Jabez topped the bestseller lists and sold more than 5 million copies. The little book prompted a lot of discussion of God’s blessing through prayer. In it, author Bruce Wilkinson of Walk Thru the Bible

explains the heretofore obscure prayer of a little known Old Testament character and how that prayer has affected Wilkinson's life and ministry.

Leadership Journal surveyed visitors to its website ([leadershipJournal.net](http://leadershipJournal.net)) on the subject of Jabez. Taken at the height of the Jabez book sales, the unscientific poll asked, "How have you and your congregation responded to the Jabez phenomenon?" The results: 22 percent said they had read the book; 18 percent considered it encouragement to pray; 13 percent said they were praying the Jabez prayer often; and 9 percent said Jabez had changed their thinking on prayer. Only 5 percent said the Jabez phenomenon is "a bunch of hooey." The book raised our awareness of one concept in particular: that believers should be bold in their prayers for God's blessing. Much was made of this short prayer and the two verses that recall it and the man who prayed it. Read 1 Chronicles 4:9–10. Tucked away in a genealogy, this passage tells us several important things: Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. God blesses whomever he chooses for his own reasons. He chose Israel, for example, not because it was great; it was the smallest among the nations (Deut. 7:7). But often, when choosing to bless individuals, God chooses and responds to the righteous. Noah is one example (Gen. 6:9). James tells us the prayer of a righteous person is effective (5:16), and Elijah is offered as an example of someone whose prayer God favorably responded to. Those who are bold enough to ask for God's blessing should assess their standing before God prior to praying. Blessing was evidence of God's hand. Material blessing is not always evidence of God's favor (remember, the rain falls on the just and the unjust). In Jabez's case, however, he asked for his territory to be enlarged and for God's hand to be with him. The two are linked. Anyone who saw the territory of Jabez would see that God was at work. And if Jabez was bold enough to ask for this blessing, he would likely be bold enough to testify of its source. God responded to Jabez's prayer. This was a full-orbed prayer. It involved material blessing (land), physical and emotional blessing (freedom from harm and pain), and spiritual blessing (God's hand). That God chose to respond to Jabez's prayer in all these ways is exhortation for us to pray, but it should not be taken as a guarantee of blessing.

[Q] What kinds of blessings should Christians pray for?

[Q] What if God doesn't bless us in the way we ask or expect?

[Q] Do you think righteousness is a prerequisite to blessing?

Why or why not?

[Q] How has God blessed you in material, physical, and spiritual ways?

[Q] Read Matthew 5:5. What do you think Jesus meant by this?

[Q] What application can we make from Matthew 5:5 for our lives?

### **Teaching Point two: God has expectations of those He blesses.**

Read Joshua 1:8, where God reiterates his agreement with Israel as the people prepare to enter the Promised Land. In his salvation history, God intends for Israel to be a light to all the peoples of the world. He is giving his chosen people a home to call their own. He has promised abundance. With his promises comes the expectation of Israel's faithfulness. He admonishes Joshua to meditate on the Law and keep it central to his teaching and governance. As a result, God says, he will prosper the people. They will have "good success," as the King James Version renders it. Our interpretation of this phrase is usually this: be good, have success. While exegetes must be careful that we do not turn the behavior-blessing connection into a formula (it would be an insult to Job and suffering Christians all over the world), there is certainly a relationship between the two. Some might be more comfortable talking in spiritual terms, saying godly behavior results in spiritual blessing.

[Q] What is your reaction to this concept?

[Q] What dangers are there in adopting this idea?

[Q] Read Psalm 73. What is Asaph's approach to this idea?

teaching Point three: those God blesses he also warns.

Jesus' teaching is replete with warnings about materialism. To the masses on the hillside, he preaches, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . . You cannot serve both God and money." To the rich young man, he says, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor. . . . Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." Read Matthew 6:19–24 and Luke 18:18–25.

[Q] How can we balance these teachings with the encouragement to ask for blessing?

[Q] As a result of this study, how might your prayer life change?

### **Part 3 apply your findings**

Action Point: On your own this week, look up all the verses and passages in the article "Unbalanced Blessings." When you've finished that, ask yourself the following questions:

[Q] How have I felt that God has been unfair to me in the past?

[Q] What kind of blessings should I be asking God for? What difference would that make in my walk with him?

Unbalanced blessings The balancing act of life is always tempered by the one gift that cost God everything. By R. J. Thesman

As we toured my friend's beautiful home, I was struck with the details of design and construction. Walnut woodwork accented each room with coordinating built-ins. Archways led into the kitchen and family room area

while granite countertops polished off each bathroom. Expansive views from the windows highlighted the country life I so admired.

“Deer and wild turkeys come often to drink out of the pond or strut across the driveway,” the homeowner said.

In the family room’s bookcase, I scanned the titles. The walnut grain of the bookcase accented the hard covers of various Bible versions, Christian fiction, and bestsellers in the inspirational market. How to have a strong marriage, how to raise wonderful kids, and how to be a witness in the community seemed to be favorite topics. The books echoed a lifetime of discipleship and service for this wonderful family.

We gathered around the thick dining room table and blessed the food. The wife spoke about God’s many blessings, how she had designed the house online, and how God had provided so many of the wonderful things they enjoyed. The husband looked adoringly at his wife while pictures of their grown children and grandchildren smiled from the entryway. Light from the golden chandelier accented the healthy features of a family blessed by the Almighty.

Later that evening, I looked at the bookshelves in my small duplex. They, too, contained some of the same books, but the results of my life deeply contrasted with the results of my friend’s life. Divorce, illness, financial insecurities, and long-term unemployment described my journey. No archways accented my kitchen. My furniture was repurposed from Goodwill or rescued from dumpsters. The country life I envied seemed as impossible as deadening the traffic noise from beyond my cul-de-sac.

My friend and I are both Christians. We love the Lord and attempt to live for him every day, but my friend’s cushy life is completely different from mine. She seems to have somehow tagged God’s blessings: a loving husband, wonderful children, financial security, and a beautiful house. She also looks forward to more blessings in heaven—a double portion of joy. On the other hand, I struggle as a single mom and can look forward to such blessings only after the doctors turn off the machines and record my time of death. I learned from Asaph that night, I cried into my pillow as I lay on my decade old mattress. “Why the disparity, Lord? I’m genuinely happy for my friend, really I am. But why are the blessings so unbalanced? Why has everything turned out so beautifully for her, and why is everything so hard for me? Have I done something wrong?”

He let me whine that night, but sent me to Psalm 73 the next morning. Asaph, one of King David’s Levitical choir directors, must have had the same struggle. In this song, Asaph describes his trial of faith. He wonders why the wicked are so prosperous.

“They have no struggles,” Asaph writes, “their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued

by human ills. . . . This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth” (vv. 4–5, 12).

In other words, “What’s the deal, God? These people are wicked, yet their lives seem to be pretty sweet. I, on the other hand, live as an oppressed Jew and have to struggle every day to make a lousy buck. Why is life so unfair?”

Asaph complained for 16 verses, then fell on his face in the sanctuary and saw the truth. The wicked were proud, with evil conceits. They would eventually be swept away by terror. Asaph, on the other hand, could depend on God to always be with him, to hold his right hand and guide him with divine counsel. With his crisis of faith resolved, Asaph sang his Amen: “It is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge” (v. 28). But Asaph compared wicked folks with faithful ones. We expect the wicked to thrive in a wicked world, because this is their comfort zone and compatible with their worldview. We also know that without Christ, they will eventually face God’s judgment. As believers, we may face persecution and trials, but we live in hope for that moment when we’ll see the face of Jesus and live eternally in paradise.

My struggle represented a different viewpoint from Asaph’s psalm, because I wondered about the inequities between Christians. My friend was not wicked in any way that I could see. She and her family had prayed the prayer of salvation, attended church faithfully, served the community, and lived exemplary lives. Yet even though our faith walks were similar, our realities differed.

However, Asaph gave me a formula to work through as I struggled with the subject of unbalanced blessings. This insightful choir director admitted that he “nearly lost [his] foothold” during his faith crisis. The reason: when he saw their prosperity, he envied the arrogant.

Although my friend didn’t appear to be arrogant as we toured her beautiful house, I still envied her prosperity. I didn’t necessarily want the same house, because our tastes are different. I just wanted more of her type of life. When I nearly lost my foothold and studied Asaph’s similar journey, I saw the envy in my own soul—basic covetousness that we need to always guard against. After a lifetime of faith and discipleship, I squared off with the tenth commandment and saw my sin: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” (Exod. 20:17).

I had justified my emotions as not exactly coveting that particular house, but the truth was that I envied my friend’s life in the country, her ability to build a beautiful new house, and all the financial security that made her life possible. When I pared back the Christianese, I saw my attitude for what it was: coveting what someone else had, not being content with my own

blessings, and despising my own life. According to God's list of commandments, I violated number ten and possibly number one: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3). If I so envied my friend's life, then I was making a plastic god out of her good fortune. The idol of worldly blessings had become another object of worship, shoving the one true God off the throne of my soul. My crisis of faith was based on plain old sin. So I spent a few moments confessing my covetousness. I recognized my desire to seek comfort from the things of this world rather than the Holy Spirit's power. Although it didn't seem unbiblical to want a beautiful house in a country setting, if I dwelt on that desire without giving it over to God, then my hopes were based on things of this world. If I coveted what someone else had, then I crossed over the line from a basic desire of the flesh to nearly losing my foothold.

The ugliness in my soul disgusted me. Asaph, I'm sure, would agree.

The second point Asaph showed me was hidden in verse 28: "it is good to be near God." Although my life did include several challenges, at least I knew without a doubt that God was with me, as near as a whispered prayer. Perhaps the Almighty had not allowed me to have the same sort of blessings as my friend, but he had blessed me with the ability to hear his voice and sense his intimacy. During the early morning hours when the divine whisper came, I felt so loved and so blessed. Nothing else mattered. I needed to focus on the supreme joy of that intimacy rather than the walnut-lined bookshelves of my friend. I needed to thank God every day that he chose to be near me. I was comparing myself to the wrong people. To force my thoughts away from that beautiful country home, I thanked God for the material blessings of my life. The fact that I lived in a duplex in a cul-de-sac in the free land of America was an intense blessing. Any number of women in Africa would have coveted my house over their grass huts in an oppressive political state.

Every night when I rotated under the spigot of my hot shower, I thanked God for that intense heat and its massaging effect on my tired muscles. Some women in Afghanistan had never felt the luxury of hot water on their tired bodies, never bathed their babies in anything other than muddy river water, never had the ease of just turning a faucet instead of walking miles and miles with a sloshing pot on their heads.

Thoroughly ashamed of myself, I made a list of some of the blessings God had allowed me to have: screens on my windows to keep the Kansas bugs out of the house; a working refrigerator with cheese, eggs, and milk waiting to become an omelet on my working electric stove; enough blankets to keep me warm during February blizzards. These represented only a few examples of how God was near and how good it was to be his child. I determined to be more grateful and focus on the not-so-obvious blessings rather than covet the ones I did not have.

Asaph's epilogue concluded his crisis with the statement that the Sovereign Lord was his refuge. The idea of sovereignty underscored the fact that God and God alone decides which of his children receive blessings and which face challenges. God had given my friend a beautiful home, a loving husband, and a prosperous life. That was God's will for her, and I was confident she was using those blessings to glorify God and further his kingdom.

God's choices for me were different, but just as blessed because they had come from his sovereign plan. He had gifted me with the ability to do several types of work so that we could survive. He had allowed me to pray every day for my car and depend on him to keep it running even though the mechanic said it had a cracked block. God allowed my washer and dryer to continue to function long past the warranty dates. I needed to turn my challenges into blessings and use them to glorify him, to practice gratitude, and to further Christ's kingdom with my prayers. The fact that he is sovereign means that god gets to choose I can pray and ask for certain blessings, but in the end, the final memo belongs to God. Jesus taught this lesson to Peter during one of their last confrontations. After a fish and chips dinner, Peter asked Jesus about the future of the beloved disciple, John. Would John also face persecution and martyrdom, or would he remain alive to see the return of Christ? In essence, Peter was asking the same question I had asked, "Why him and not me?"

Jesus answered, "[W]hat is that to you? You must follow me" (John 21:22). It was none of Peter's business what happened to John. If the Sovereign God decided to let John live a long and prosperous life and die of natural causes, then God's plan for John was good. If Peter had to die upside down, stretched out like a rubber band on a lethal beam, then God's plan for Peter was also good. Peter had no business questioning God's ultimate plan for another person. His role as a disciple was to faithfully follow his Lord and accept God's plan for him.

It was none of my business if God chose to bless others both on this earth and in heaven. That was God's decision and his choice. He had chosen to bless me in different ways. Just the fact that he allowed me to be one of his children was an incredible blessing straight from the loving heart of the Almighty. My role was to be his disciple, to serve him in whatever venue he placed me, and not to covet the blessings of others.

On God's scales, everything is balanced by the ultimate gift of his Son. No matter how we live our lives on this earth, whether we have it fairly easy or face one challenge after another, the balancing act of life is always tempered by the one gift that cost God everything. The ultimate blessing that is available to all is the blessing of grace. Nothing else really matters.

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