

Good or Great

Are You Willing To Be Great?

Some years ago I developed a sermon but by Wednesday I didn't like it. I felt like I could have done a better job, that it was not up to my abilities. It wasn't that the sermon was terrible or that it was not Biblically accurate. What struck me was that anyone who had just a little bit of Bible knowledge could have developed it. There was nothing in the sermon that seemed to me to be of value; that was worth sitting through if I was in the congregation. This impression stayed with me through Wednesday and into Thursday. What troubled me was that if I were to change it, I would have to put together a completely different sermon and that meant the time I spent earlier was wasted and work I hoped to finish at the end of the week would go undone. What did God want me to do? Present the sermon anyway despite its significant flaws or start over? I don't believe anyone would have criticized me if I stuck with the original sermon and I didn't think it was boring so it might have been fine. It just did not seem to be good enough and that kept me perplexed. We are going to take a look at the consideration that although you might be good, you could be missing out on greatness. The Big Idea is this: God made you to be great so put in the effort to reach His high standard for your life.

More than twenty years ago, a bestselling book took the Christian world by storm. It was titled, The Prayer of Jabez, and it did a deep dive into one of the lesser known individuals mentioned in the Bible. Here is what the Scripture says of him in its entirety. **Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. His mother had named him Jabez, saying, "I gave birth to him in pain." Jabez cried out to the God of Israel, "Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain." And God granted his request.** (1 Chronicles 4: 9-10 NIV) The emphasis of Bruce Wilkinson's short book was on what Jabez prayed and God's response. His thoughts on it have been criticized and applauded but today we won't look at Jabez's prayer but rather at Jabez himself. A more precise translation of verse nine reads, **And it came to be, Jabez was honored more than his brothers and his mother named him Jabez, saying "For I gave birth in suffering."** There are two aspects to this. First, the name Jabez is a play on the Hebrew word pain. The consonants are switched around, but it clearly was noticeable to the others in the community. Jabez's mother thought he was a pain and she named him so. It's not a very auspicious beginning and the future is generally not bright for someone whose mother thinks so little of him. Jabez, however, broke free of the stigmatism and became "honored more than his brothers".

We don't know anything about Jabez really. Although he is listed in the genealogical line of Judah, where he fits into it is not stated. What his occupation was, who he married, and more importantly, why he was more honored than his brothers is not recorded in the Biblical record. We simply know the Lord answered his prayer to be blessed by God and free of pain. There was something about the character of Jabez that stood out, enough so that in the long genealogy presented in 1 Chronicles where all we know of those listed is just their names, he is marked for special notice. He was more honored than his brothers. Most people live like the names in the genealogy. They exist but they never do anything that would stand out as believers in Christ. There is nothing about them that shows they made the most of the opportunities God gave them. Jabez was not like that. He lived above the rest, was more honorable than the others. Is that what you would like to be? Someone the Lord honors above others, who is more noble than the rest! We have no idea what Jabez's accomplishments were. All we are told is that he was more honorable than his brothers. Let's look at three more in the Bible who you could easily see as like Jabez, more honorable than others.

The first is Nehemiah. He was the cupbearer to the king of Persia, and he was Jewish. Nehemiah, like so many, was an exile. His family was captured by the Babylonians and forced to move to the region where the Persian empire formed. Somehow he was made the cupbearer which was quite risky but also prestigious. The trust the king had to place in Nehemiah was tremendous and the account indicates that the two were good friends. After Nehemiah's brother visited old Jerusalem, the city of their ancestors, he came back reporting the city was in ruins and the wall around it was completely wrecked and useless. When Nehemiah heard this, (he probably had never seen Jerusalem during his lifetime) he was heartbroken and determined to go try to rebuild the wall. After he got permission from the king to go and the authority to initiate the work, he traveled to Jerusalem and in 52 days, led a team of residents in Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. **So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.** (Nehemiah 6: 15 NIV) It is noted in the book of Nehemiah that the wall provided the city protection from marauders and enemy armies. Consider this. The wall was destroyed in 586 BC. It was not until 444 BC when Nehemiah took charge and despite great opposition, restored the wall. That is nearly 150 years, more than the time it has been since the San

Francisco earthquake. Imagine if it took 150 years before someone decided to rebuild the ruins of San Francisco. How many thousands and thousands of Israelites had come and gone but not one thought it worth their time and effort to organize the rebuilding of the wall. I can't imagine any of the Israelites were happy with the state of the wall around Jerusalem but only one person was willing to go to the effort to repair it. Someone who was more honored than the rest.

Esther, the beauty queen who actually became the Queen of Persia because of her beauty, found herself in a terrible position. Her husband, the king of Persia was convinced by his right hand man to order the destruction of all the Israelites living in his empire. It was all because that right-hand man, Haman had been disrespected by Mordecai, a Jew who refused to bow to Haman when he passed through the gate. Mordecai raised Esther the queen, who was, unbeknownst to her husband, also Jewish. Esther could obviously avoid the genocide because she was the queen and her heritage hidden, but all of her fellow Jews would soon die if nothing was done. Mordecai sent her a note calling for her to go to her husband the king and beg for the deliverance of the Jews. **So Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate. Mordecai told him everything that had happened to him, including the exact amount of money Haman had promised to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict for their annihilation, which had been published in Susa, to show to Esther and explain it to her, and he told him to urge her to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people.** (Esther 4: 6-8 NIV) Esther though was terrified of going to her husband the king with this plea. This was her reply by secret message to Mordecai. **"All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king."** (Esther 4: 11 NIV)

The situation, however, was too grave for Mordecai to simply give Esther a pass on this. His response was swift and pointed and one of the most memorable statements found in the Old Testament. **"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"** (Esther 4: 13-14 NIV) Esther accepted Mordecai's rebuke and went to the king, at the risk to her life and pleaded for the king to show mercy to her people, the Jews. The king issued an order for the Jews to be able to protect themselves against any attacks by their enemies and the Hebrew people were saved. Which version of Esther would you rather be, the Esther who did not want to risk her life, or the one who with complete dependence upon the Lord brought her appeal to the king? Which Jewish resident or visitor to Jerusalem would you rather be, all the ones who passed by the wall and did nothing about it or Nehemiah, who risked his career and even his life to pull everyone together to rebuild it. Most people are like all the rest who see a need, a problem, a necessity and decide it isn't their issue and then there are those who are nobler than the rest, more honorable than all the others and sacrifice to do what God has for them. Mordecai put it perfectly. You have a place in the plans of God, and it is yours choose to do your duty, fulfill your destiny or ignore God's call and let the honor you could gain slip away.

One more example, this time from the New Testament. When Paul was in prison for the last time, on the verge of execution, he sent a letter to his trusted friend Timothy. Out of all the people in the church, all those who Paul helped come to Christ, who in essence owed their lives to Paul, only one of them was with Paul at the end. **Only Luke is with me.** (2 Timothy 4: 11a NIV) There are just a few people God can use for the work of the Kingdom and the advancement of God's plans. It is those who make themselves available to Him, who are more honorable than the rest. Not many rise to the top like a Nehemiah, an Esther or a Jabez. Why couldn't you? Is it possible you might be one known among God's people as more honorable than the rest? Would it be said of you that of all those you knew, the Lord honors you for hearing His call and answering Him with a "Yes, I will do it"? The Big Idea is this: God made you to be great so put in the effort to reach His high standard for your life. Look around and see what God is calling you to do and courageously accept His call. Only a few are known as more honorable than the rest. Why can't that be you?