

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

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Do You Have a Treasure?

By Jennifer Swenson

I had viewed it as ordinary and unremarkable, but this experience showed me what a priceless gift I have.



AS CELEBRITIES, THEY'RE PRETTY UNLIKELY. They dress in conservative suits and talk of arcane subjects. Yet for six years they have enticed hundreds of thousands of average people all across the United States to stand in line for hours for the opportunity to share their stories of family heirlooms, garage sale finds and genuine "Tiffany" lamps. They're the expert appraisers from the PBS series *Antiques Roadshow*.

If you're hooked on the show, as I am, you identify with the optimistic people who bring paintings purchased for a reluctant 50 cents at yard sales, hoping the appraisers will reveal they are actually museum-quality masterpieces.

Most people discover that their junk is just junk. Some even find that items they had thought were valuable are only imitations. But every week, someone brings in a toy, or a vase or a lunch box that they've taken for granted for years, only to discover that at auction they could expect to sell the item for thousands of dollars to a collector.

If you watch the show, you'll see owners suddenly transformed, from stoic narrators to crying, laughing, jumping, overwhelmed jackpot winners. They're the same people. They have the same job, the same family and the same possessions. But suddenly, they look at everything differently. Especially their "treasure."

In a few moments, what had been considered an out-of-date relic, previously relegated to the basement, becomes a cherished possession. The item was always the same. The only difference was that someone finally helped them understand its true value.

If you're like me, you find it easy to take your treasures for granted too. Take prayer, for instance.

The opportunity to have a private audience with our Creator and Ruler--at any time we choose--can seem like an unremarkable occurrence, since it occurs every day. Sometimes it takes something a little unusual to reveal the value in that contact with God.

God cares about the little things

I'm ashamed to admit that before praying, I sometimes screen out items that I assume are too insignificant. Especially in the wake of current events, I sometimes think, "With all the suffering in the world, unrest in the Middle East, war in Afghanistan, how can I bother God with my little hopes and concerns?"



Deep down, I realize that God is acutely aware of all those things I categorize as too mundane to discuss with Him. "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31).

Recently, however, I had one of those little experiences that brought the point home, almost like an appraiser showing me the value and purpose of sharing details of life with our Father. It seemed to offer me the permission to "beat my prayers fine."

I was praying about relationships: family situations, people I had drifted away from, even a church member I hadn't liked for a long time.

First, I asked for God's help in gathering my busy family for some "quality" time together. School, college, work, computers and television...so many factors usually stand in the way of deep family conversations. I really longed for the closeness of a long chat. The very next day our family was home together. A mild windstorm caused a localized power outage. And for one wonderful afternoon, my teenaged kids snuggled under a quilt with me and giggled as they had when they were little!

Next, I told God that I hadn't felt close with my friends at church lately. With jobs and family, our lives seemed too busy to stay in touch beyond a friendly word at services. The following weeks, I had the opportunity to work on some projects with my church friends: a church variety show, the selection of a gift for local teens. I felt closer to them, and one of them mentioned to me over the phone, "I appreciate your friendship." Those were simple words. But they were exactly the words I needed to hear.

What had been considered an out-of-date relic becomes a cherished possession. The only difference was that someone finally helped them understand its true value.

Finally, I asked God's blessing on the "prickly" church member. Don't get me wrong. I had prayed for him many times. But this time, I didn't ask God to help him see the error of his ways. I just asked God to bless him abundantly. Within weeks, we shared a conversation that was warmer than any we had had for many years.

These three prayers--all uttered the same day--were simple and unremarkable. What was remarkable was the rapid response, a little reminder from God that He hears and answers

even the smallest prayers.

As if I'd had a visit from the *Antiques Roadshow*, suddenly, I saw many material things that had been consuming my time were simply fakes.

Even more important, prayer was transformed from the ordinary into the treasure it truly is.

Who Me? I Have Nothing to Offer

By Janet Treadway

Like me, you may have felt you were passed by when talents were handed out. But with God's help you can make a difference in this world.



WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL I tried very hard to be included. I tried out for many different activities, but always seemed to be the one sitting on the bench or not chosen. It made me feel rejected, stupid and worthless. I wanted to be a great basketball player or cheerleader, but it didn't happen. Because of this rejection, I carried a sense of worthlessness into my adult life. I was afraid to volunteer for things because I felt I had nothing to offer. I feared that I would only mess up and embarrass myself. It was easier not to try.

While many of us lament that we have little or no talent, that we possess no "gifts" or special abilities, there are others with much greater handicaps who are simply doing. Take Mary Clough, for instance.

Mary has Down's syndrome. But despite her limitations, Mary contributes. According to Steve Goodier's Newsletter at <http://www.bestinspiration.com>, she is a volunteer teacher at the school she attended many years ago. Mary works with 2- and 3-year-olds, some with Down's syndrome and some without. Among other tasks, she helps with puzzles, reads stories and teaches the kids a variety of athletic activities. "We care about little kids here," she says. "We set examples for them."

Mary uses her knowledge and experiences to serve others. She makes a difference in the lives of others. How can we become more like Mary and avoid the self-pity trap that Satan wants us all to fall into? How can we get past the attitude that we have nothing to offer?

Ask God to give you talents

After much frustration and feeling that I had nothing to offer, I decided to do something about it. I got on my knees and asked God to give me talents that I could use to help others. He answered that prayer in ways greater than I could even imagine! The doors blew open and I was able to do things that I never thought possible.

God gave me talents to use for His glory. I went from helping out with potlucks to organizing them. I was given the opportunity to organize fund raisers and a teen magazine. I went from someone who felt she had nothing to offer to someone who had much to give. Why? Because I asked God. Does God answer our prayers? Yes! But we have to ask.

Do we just ask and then wait for God to magically present us with talents? We have to take action, in faith, knowing that God will help us.

John 14:13-14 says, "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." We also read in Luke 11:11, "If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish?"

God wants to give us things that are good for us that we can use to help others. We must first ask, but is this all we are required to do? Do we just ask God and then wait for God to magically present us with talents? No! We have to take action, in faith, knowing that God will help us.

Action develops talents

David, who later became king of Israel, had courage to act when everyone else was too fearful to fight Goliath. He asked God in prayer to help him, and then he faced a giant. Each of us has our own Goliaths to face. Mine were feelings of inferiority and worthlessness.

But no one is worthless. In Ephesians 2:10 God tells us, "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them." As King David did, I first asked God to give me talents to use for His glory. Then I had to step out in faith and act. Faith without works is dead! Ask and then act. The more you take part in serving and giving of yourself, the more you will develop new talents. The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 clearly shows how one servant, out of fear, hid the one talent that he had instead of developing it. By using the talents they had been given, the other two servants actually doubled them.

Never give up!

He failed as a businessman and as a storekeeper, and he failed at his first attempt to obtain a political office. When finally elected to the legislature, he failed when he sought the office of speaker. He failed in his first attempt to go to Congress. He failed when he sought the appointment to the United States Land Office. He failed when he ran for the United States Senate. He failed when friends sought for him the nomination for the vice-presidency in 1856.

"...He'll never come to much, fur I'll tell you he wuz the puniest, cryin'est little youngster I ever saw," said Dennis Hanks, a first cousin of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, on the day Abraham Lincoln was born.

But Abraham Lincoln kept on going through all his setbacks, through all the negative words. What amazes Lincoln buffs was his capacity for growth and his intellectual resourcefulness, given the obstacles and miseries he had experienced during most of his life. Lincoln had a lot to offer and did great things, in spite of his many failures. If Lincoln had given in to feelings that "he had nothing to

offer," the course of history would have been completely changed.

One of Lincoln's famous quotes tells the secret of his success: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day" (*Lincoln Observed: The Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks* edited by Michael Burlingame, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998, p. 210).

We, too, will face failures in our efforts to use our abilities. We'll hear discouraging words from others. But if we, like Lincoln, seek God's help for our inadequacies, we will also be able to do great things for Him.

Part of God's work is to prepare His people for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up. "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). It is God's intention and desire that we be able to serve.

So how can we get beyond these fears of inferiority and begin to discover and develop talents for the use of others? First, ask God to give you talents. Then begin to look around for needs and act.

Sign lists to help. Let it be known that you would like to help. People cannot read your mind. Many times they are not even aware that you want to help. Remember, you will make mistakes; just get up and try, try again. The most successful people are those who did not give up when failures knocked them down.

Keep doing! You learn from experience. The more you do, the more you will develop the talents that can be used for God's glory.

Remember the story of Mary Clough with Down's syndrome? She did not use her handicap as an excuse to say, "I have nothing to offer." We all have plenty to offer. The needs are great in your church, your school and your community.

You can begin to discover talents that you never thought you had, by asking God, by taking action and not quitting! Abe Lincoln, King David and Mary Clough had a lot to offer. So do you and I.

A Tale of Two Sisters

By Joan Osborn

The dishes can wait! There are more important things.



IN THE 1970s Mac Davis had a hit record titled *Stop and Smell the Roses*. For years I had no deep understanding of what Mac was talking about. As a working mother I often found myself stressed out over the many responsibilities that were hanging over my head. If there were roses around, I wasn't only not smelling them, I wasn't even seeing them!

There was a woman in the Bible who did see and understand the principle of this song. And she had a sister who, like me, was clueless. Let me tell you this tale of two sisters.

Mary and Martha lived in Bethany, a village not far from Jerusalem. They had a brother named Lazarus. None of them appears to have been married, at least no spouses are mentioned. Jesus knew them quite well. One gospel account tells us that He loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus.

Martha was the older sister. We can surmise from Luke 10:38 that she may have owned the home she welcomed Jesus into. Because of Bethany's closeness to Jerusalem He may have stayed with them often.

On one particular visit Martha prepared a large meal. Jesus may have had several disciples with him. Perhaps the 12, perhaps more. Neighbors could have also gathered after hearing that Jesus was at Martha's house. All we know for sure is that Mary was sitting and listening to Jesus while Martha was working. This bothered Martha and she asked Jesus about it.

Martha obviously was a person with many

"Don't you care Lord that my sister is leaving me to do all the work. Tell her to help me" (Luke 10:40, NLT). Jesus chided Martha a little. I would imagine it was gently done because of His love for this family. He told

*responsibilities...
Was she wrong to
put so much effort
into her life? No.
But, as Jesus told
her, we must put
first things first.*

Martha she was worried and troubled about many things. Too concerned about the details of everything. He pointed out that what Mary was learning was important information that couldn't be taken away from her. Maybe He even told Martha the dishes could wait.

The Bible doesn't record what Martha replied to Christ, but it would be interesting to know. Did she go off muttering to herself about how no one ever helped her or did she take time to sit down and listen to what else Jesus had to say?

Put first things first

Do you ever find yourself being a Martha? Are you sometimes so busy that you don't take time to sit at Jesus' feet? Martha obviously was a person with many responsibilities. She had a home and took care of a brother and sister. She did this without the modern conveniences of today. It was a difficult task in a challenging time in history. Was she wrong to put so much effort into her life? No. But, as Jesus told her, we must put first things first.

This tale of two sisters points out the importance of taking time from our busy lives to spend time with God and His Son Jesus Christ. So how can we make sure we are doing all we can to build our relationship with our God and His Son?

First, it is more important for me to spend time with God than it is to have my floor waxed. There was a time in my life when I would have made myself sick with guilt if my house were the least bit dirty. But Mary taught me an important lesson about faithfulness to God. Perhaps she was even present when He uttered the words from Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

Sometimes we have to let things go for a time. Does this mean God wants me to have a dirty house, an unkempt yard or a sloppy lifestyle? No, but if I do my part and seek God first, He will take care of the rest. Does God do my dusting, washing and mowing? No. But when I put my life in God's hands, things seem to work more smoothly. I get more things done than I ever thought possible. And the things I don't get done I don't stress about.

*When I put my life
in God's hands, I
get more things
done than I ever
thought possible.
And the things I
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don't stress about.*

Mary was learning at Jesus' feet that the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17). She found that pearl of great price that makes life worth living.

Even on the go

Consider, too, that each of us is an individual with different responsibilities. We must each find our unique way of building our relationship with our Creator.

Daniel's example teaches us that regular contact with God is essential. But there may be days when your prayers are longer than other days. Ephesians 6:18 tells us to pray always. It is not the length but the sincerity that God is seeking. The Pharisees were noted for long prayers, and Christ was not happy with their fruit.

We know we are to study the Word of God. It may not always be possible to sit down and study the Bible for an hour. But you could listen to sermon or Bible study tapes on your way to and from work. We are a traveling society. Sometimes it seems I spend more time in my car than in my house every day.

Colossians 3:16 says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs..." We can learn about God from songs about Him. We can sing to ourselves, or we can listen to others singing. There are many good sources of Christian music. Your sermon for the day may be via your car's cassette or CD player.

Jesus told Martha that there was one thing needed, and that Mary had chosen it. The story of Mary and Martha points to our need to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from Him. It also points to our need to want to do this. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6). David expressed it this way: "One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life. To behold the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple" (Psalm 27:4). If your desire to study is diminished, ask God to help your desire increase. He knows our needs, but we need to ask.

Mac Davis was right. We do need to stop and smell the roses. Let's take the time to do so even if we have to cut the rose and carry it with us in order to smell it.

Walking Through the Valley of the Shadow -- The Pain of Losing a Child

By Caroline Whitt

How does a parent go on after such a devastating loss?



ONE OF THE WORST THINGS a parent can ever experience is the sickness and eventual death of a child. When my son Jake died, I felt like my heart had been slowly ripped out, thrown to the floor, stomped on and then put back in my chest. Afterwards I was expected to go on living. How does a Christian handle this?

One man I met after Jake's death told me that if his son died, he would *have* to commit suicide. He couldn't go on living. One of the women that I worked with asked me, "How do you go on?" A lady I met a few months ago who lost her two-year-old daughter in a car accident asked, "When does the hurt go away?"

When your child is sick, as a parent, you try everything to make him better. You try prayer, fasting, anointing and every medical option (in our case a heart transplant). You often feel numb with hope. You have faith that your child will be healed. When nothing seems to help, you feel as if you have failed. It's a feeling that your heart is slowly being pulled out of your chest. What's the purpose of this suffering and this pain?

Jacob Lee Whitt was my healthy, 15-year-old son who became sick with flu-like symptoms. I tried to nurse him back to health. Our minister anointed him, but he deteriorated. One evening he felt faint. We rushed him to the emergency room. My prayer on the way was, "Please God don't let him have pneumonia."

When we arrived, the doctors listened to his heart and took x-rays. Jake's heart and liver were enlarged, and they thought he would need a heart transplant. This blew my mind. I felt my heart was the damaged one.

How does a healthy, young, well-behaved Christian teenager suddenly have such a terrible thing happen to him? What caused this? The doctors didn't know. Jake was sent to Riley Children's Hospital in Indianapolis. I was numb. My heart was slowly being squeezed.

They put Jake on IV heart drugs. For four months he became steadily worse. He was placed on the heart transplant list where he soon jumped to the top of the list.

Jake experienced many complications before the transplant. He died and was revived twice before he received his new heart. Jake's new heart came from a 21-year-old girl who died in a car accident. It is a truly selfless act for any family to donate their child's heart so that someone else might have a chance to live.

I knew I could talk to God because He understood my hurt from His own experience.

On the day of his transplant, 104 people were present in the waiting room. The support given to our family was fabulous. Doctors and nurses came to see the young man who so many people loved. News traveled about his good attitude and about his family and concerned friends. The nurses argued over who would take care of him. Later on, after his death, some of those nurses required counseling.

In the three months following Jake's transplant, more complications set in. He had no feeling from the waist down. His kidneys began to fail. They couldn't take him off the respirator because he was too weak. Then he was given a tracheotomy. But the tubes had been down his throat so long he wouldn't stop bleeding. They had to turn him upside down and pack his throat and nose to stop the bleeding. His skin was under-nourished and stretch marks appeared everywhere. Eventually, his whole back was bleeding. When bandages were changed, part of the skin would peel off. His fingernails became loose.

One event that stands out in my mind was when they took out chest tubes and put them back in. I was standing outside his room watching. The doctors jabbed him in the side with the chest tube, and I saw Jake jump. The thought of Jesus Christ being stabbed in the side and all the torture He went through came to me.

We made one of the hardest decisions of our lives at that time. Enough is enough. If he suffers cardiac arrest again, let him go. How did God the Father stand this? How did Mary His mother not break down? Jesus' earthly mother and heavenly Father had to feel this same painful grief that I was experiencing. Surely, I wasn't alone. Their hands were tied like mine. There was nothing they could do. The most perfect Being who ever existed had to die so that we would live. But can you imagine how His Father felt? God is the most loving of all Fathers and He had to go through this. He had the power to save His son from torture and death, but He didn't because of us.

When do we say enough is enough? When it comes to your child when do you say, "Stop! He has suffered enough!"

Jake's new heart was doing fine. His brain was fine. He continually put our feelings before his own even though his body was falling apart. The doctors said he should have died after the first complication and every complication after, but he hung on for his family.

The last time Jake suffered cardiac arrest before his death they split his chest open from

pressing on it so hard. We made one of the hardest decisions of our lives at that time. Enough is enough. If he suffers cardiac arrest again, let him go. He had suffered enough. Jake died that night just as the Sabbath was beginning. I made a promise to Jake on his deathbed that I would be with him when he wakes up.

At the funeral I felt like my heart had been ripped out, stomped on and shoved back into my chest. The scars were new and deep, but I had to go on. Jake was safe now. No more pain and suffering for him. I knew his spirit was safe with God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).



But how could I begin the healing of my ripped-out heart? How would I make the blood flow again through my veins without pain? How would the scar where my heart resided heal and disappear? Would I take medication to become numb and just prolong the healing? Would I drink to hide the hurt and prolong the hurt? Would I go into a shell and hide from the world? Would I kill myself and risk never seeing my son again?

I knew I could talk to God because He understood my hurt from His own experience. My battered heart began to heal talking to God. I gained comfort from my Creator. I could talk to Him about Jake. When I needed to talk to Jake, I talked to God. God gave me the strength to help the other family members, especially his brother and four sisters who had kept vigil with Jake throughout the devastation of his illness and death.

After the healing process began, I would run into others with deaths in their families. They would open up to me. I asked them questions. I let them tell me about their sorrow. This was a part of the healing that helped both of us. You must talk about the loved one that you've lost.

How do you make the hurt go away? The scars and hurt will fade some with time. But the total healing of our broken hearts will not be complete until the return of our Savior Jesus Christ. We will at this time see our loved ones again (1 Thessalonians 4:14). No more scars will exist on our damaged hearts. *It will be as if it never happened.* God will erase and make all things new (Revelation 21:4).

But while we are waiting for Jesus' return, we can lighten our scars by helping those that have also gone through death or other troubles. These people need us. We have a bond with and something to offer them. Helping others will help us too.

King David said, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

Remember, *God can mend a stomped-on heart.*

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Just Do It!

By Joan Osborn

It's easy to make excuses, but God can work great changes in our lives if we let Him!



I HAVE SPENT A GOOD PART OF MY LIFE as a Christian but I am not sure that until recently any real fruit was growing in my life. I was doing some things on the outside but on the inside things weren't really changing very much.

Christ actually comes to live in us when God imparts His Holy Spirit. What an opportunity! What are we doing with it? It's only when we truly crucify our flesh and get rid of the old man that the Spirit of God can grow in us.

When I started to seriously ask myself how I was doing, I had to admit failure. Why? Because I was hanging on to things that I should have let go years ago. I wasn't taking responsibility for my own actions. It was always someone else's fault that I got angry, acted immaturely, spoke unkindly, etc. It's easy to make excuses for why we aren't behaving like Christians. But excuses are just forms of human reasoning. We are lying to ourselves.

This is a world of people absorbed in themselves. We see the effects of this self-absorption in politics, entertainment, careers and families. As Christians, it can be a real battle to stand against this. For in reality who but Satan is the ultimate self-absorbed creature? His message is strong. As Christians, we are to stand fast against him (1 Peter 5:8) and not follow his lead. We are to follow in the steps of the Good Shepherd Christ (1 Peter 2: 21-22).

What does this ultimately come down to? It's all about making right choices. We are faced with hundreds of choices every day. Some of these choices involve issues of sin some do not. When these choices do involve sin we can't compromise. We need to "choose life."

Satan has filled our world with many negative emotions. They are the root cause of complaining, lies, self-pity and hatred. They invade every facet of every society. They even invade Christians' lives and homes. These negative emotions cause us to make the wrong

choices and sin (James 4:1).

With God's help we need to replace these negative things with positive, godly things; things like peace, thanksgiving, praise, kindness, truth. It's not enough just to stop doing something negative. It's like digging a hole. You can take the dirt out; but if you don't put something else in the hole, eventually the dirt you removed will wash back into it.



A few years ago the shoe manufacturer Nike came up with a slogan that became familiar worldwide. The slogan was "*JUST DO IT.*" Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that we, like the slogan, must "just do it." We must allow God to work change in our lives. And perhaps a better slogan would be the familiar "Let go and let God!" Let go of that old creation and start becoming that new creature in Christ.

James admonished us to be "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). God expects evidence of the fruits of His Holy Spirit in our lives. We are new creatures in Christ. We should be like beacons in a dark world. How are we doing?