

# Virtual Christian MAGAZINE

*hope and encouragement for the real world*

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### *Virtual Christian Magazine*

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## Virtual Christian MAGAZINE Editorial

### How Well Do You Know God?

by Jack R. Elliott

*How close do you feel to God? How close do you feel He is to you?*

The way you feel about God is paramount to your relationship with Him. It affects your confidence that He is there to help you, and your trust that He will deliver you out of your afflictions and help you through your mistakes, problems and difficulties (Psalm 34:19). Do you see that He is not there just to sit in judgment of you? He loves you and will be there for you (1 John 4:8-11) to bring you to the point of birth into His family as a child of God.

All that we know, all that we see around us, and all that we have or hope for comes from God's graciousness. God's creation of this physical universe set the stage for God's plan and purpose for mankind. It is a gift of God. Even our life and breath is a gift of God. The apostle John writes: "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:1-3).

Jesus said, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). Again He said, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him" (John 14:23).

Our part is to want to be like God and to love Him and His ways, and embrace His biblical instructions, thereby walking in His ways--the ways of His family. Just as a boy wants to be like his father, we will want to be like our heavenly Father. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

God is more willing to give us of His spiritual things when we ask than we are of giving our children bread when they ask (Matthew 7:9-11). True righteousness comes from having the Spirit of God in us which is not normal to the flesh. God's Spirit leads us in genuine, outgoing love and concern for others apart from self interest. It prepares us for the way we hope to live eternally. We must draw near to God and He will draw near to us (James 4:8).

### **How do we draw near to God?**

David, a man after God's own heart, meditated always on Gods laws, statutes and precepts with their instructions and guidance in righteousness. He loved God's spiritual laws of life.

They are far above other laws, because they are the laws governing the way to live purposefully and joyfully for eternity. David prayed, "I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word" (Psalm 119:15-16).

David also said in Psalm 23, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

"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. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil [symbolic of the Holy Spirit]; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Do you feel that way about God? Are you that close to Him? Do you want to be that close to Him? Do you love God and want Him for your shepherd?

If so, as Jesus said, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor [the same as] yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

How can we love God if we only think of Him as one who is watching us to catch us sinning in order to punish us? God is giving and forgiving. When we live in sin, it actually does injustice to both God, neighbor and ourselves. As a loving Father, He corrects in order to save us from destruction because death, the result of sin, keeps us out of His family and kingdom. When we repent, He is quick to forgive.

We love God because He first loved us. He has created the whole universe for us. He made us in His image (Genesis 1:26-28) so we can become just like Him.

When He calls us He grants us repentance of sin. His Son died for us so that we may be reconciled to Him. He gives us His Holy Spirit in order that we receive the kind of love by which we turn away from selfishness and truly love Him and neighbor. As we repent of old carnal ways, He helps us grow in godly character. He that grows, bears fruit and overcomes to the end shall be saved. Thus He calls us and invites us to become His own precious sons and daughters.

We reciprocate as we become God's obedient loving children, growing in His family character--children in whom He is well pleased.

God said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." So we may boldly say: "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear" (Hebrews 13:5-6).

So you see, God's love for you is not just a sentimental thing, nor is He a harsh master as He is so often pictured. His love bears deep concern for your very best eternal welfare and His gifts are precious beyond anything men can imagine.

As your Father, He wants you to succeed. His gift of the Holy Spirit allows you to grow in the same kind of love that He has for you--deep unselfish love for Him and your neighbor. You can be as close to God as you want, and He will draw close to you as you draw close to Him.

# Listening— A Lost Art?

*Improving our listening skills  
can improve our relationships as well.*

**By Barbara Fenney**



**O**NE OF THE BIGGEST single reasons for relationship problems, researchers have found, is that people don't really listen to each other. We seem by nature to be impatient with one another and with life in general. Listening to and taking on board another's point of view takes time, energy and effort that many are not willing to expend. This is true within the family, at work and even in highly public situations--as is evident in many television and radio talk shows where people express strong opinions on almost every subject under the sun yet rarely appear to be actually listening to anyone else.

Even when people are convinced they are listening to others, often they are not. Many have experienced a situation where in seeking help and solace, they are trying to share a confidence with another person, and yet they sense they do not have the listener's full attention. Frequently unwanted or even unrelated advice will follow, proving the lack of genuine interest. This can result in a build-up of resentment and a reluctance to share further confidences or information. It may even lead to an outburst of anger, or worse. All could have been prevented with just a little more consideration on the part of the listener.

It is easy to see how such a scenario could lead to problems within a marriage, family or at the workplace. Yet having no one to share a problem with can result in feelings of loneliness and frustration, a loss of self-esteem and some forms of depression. We all need to be able to express our feelings at times, but finding a willing ear may be difficult.

Listening is a skill that can be learned, but first we need to realize why we are not listening. People don't listen to each other for many reasons. Often poor listening habits are due to impatience, selfish inattention or a lack of concentration.

However, there are basic techniques that can be used to recognize problems that block listening and to improve listening skills. It is impossible to solve any problem unless it is admitted to and recognized. We probably all need to become more self-aware and take ownership of and responsibility for our actions and reactions. The following solution can be adapted and applied to lots of different areas of human difficulties: trying to control anger, breaking a bad habit, overcoming a persistent problem like lying or exaggerating or, in this case, not listening attentively.

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1. Select one of the blocks (or a problem) that you recognize in yourself.
2. Try to think of a time when you have used it recently.
3. Visualize the situation and, if you can, analyze how and why it happened.
4. Try to be aware if you use it over the next few days and weeks. As you become more aware of your listening habits, you will probably find you use that block less.
5. Having dealt with one block, work on another.

Writing down your thoughts and observations can help you to become more aware.

### **The necessity for empathy**

The apostle Paul encourages us to "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). Sharing another's feelings is called empathy--not to be confused with sympathy, which is simply feeling pity or sorrow for another.

Empathy includes communicating that you have understood another's point of view. It doesn't necessarily mean you agree with it or condone it. It has been described as "seeing the world through another's eyes, as if it were your own, but without losing the 'as if.'"

Thanks to God's gift of imagination, we can actually put ourselves into another person's position and relate to his or her feelings. Focusing on another's feelings or viewpoint can help clarify problem situations. The starting point must be the other's point of view, even if it needs to be challenged.

### **Communicating Empathy**

To communicate understanding you must put into words what has been said. There are a number of techniques that can be used:

- **Paraphrasing:** Here you put what you have heard into your own words with your understanding of the main point of the problem. Often a paraphrased response will start: "So you're saying that..." "It sounds like you..." "You feel...and it's because..."

Paraphrasing gives an opportunity for clarification if you haven't fully understood. This can happen either because you have missed something, or because the other party hasn't yet revealed all the necessary information. Verbalizing the other's point of view also puts it into your mind, so it becomes part of your understanding even though you may not agree with it.

Paraphrasing can also help the one confiding in you by focussing their attention on the implications of what they are saying--especially if their thinking seems illogical, irrational or unreasonable.

- **Reflecting:** Here you repeat a word back, for example: "I'm so angry that he died." "Angry?" You might also reflect a feeling you are picking up that the person has not expressed. This may take more practice and insight: "You sounded angry when you said that."
- **Summarizing/clarifying:** Similar to paraphrasing, but here you sum up your understanding of the whole problem. "Let me make sure I've understood correctly...." "Do you mean that...?"
- **Questions:** There is a fine line between being interested and intruding. If you feel the need to ask a question, ask yourself why and for whom you are asking. Is it out of genuine concern and the need to clarify some point, or is it out of mere curiosity?

Don't ask questions that can be answered simply "yes" or "no." Ask "open" questions--how, what, why, when: "What are you feeling?", "Why do you think that happened?"

By using these techniques you are actually forced to listen more carefully to what the other person says. You cannot paraphrase, for instance, unless you have been paying attention. Since you have listened and hopefully understood the points correctly, the other person probably will be more inclined to reveal a little more of his or her problem or feelings.

The above techniques can also be used when trying to resolve an argument between two parties, or to establish middle ground before negotiations or discussions. Try to remember you are there to listen, not necessarily to give advice or solve the problem immediately.

### **Some cautions**

The Bible warns against answering a matter before hearing it in full (Proverbs 18:13). We shouldn't jump to conclusions and assume we have all the information. Many people are reluctant to divulge everything at once, which is why truly listening can take time and involve lots of patience. Remember to keep a confidence, no matter how difficult it may be. Repeating it to a third party will only cause trouble (Proverbs 17:9) and inevitably destroys credibility. No one trusts a gossip.



In exceptional circumstances it may become necessary to divulge a confidence. "Exceptional circumstances" might include occasions when criminal activity is involved, a child may be in potential peril, or the person confiding in you is in some sort of danger. In such





cases the appropriate authorities should be involved, preferably with the other person's consent.

Be sure to avoid being drawn into another person's anger, especially if there appears to be bitterness towards a third party. If you are being subjected to a tirade of vitriolic abuse (as opposed to strongly worded complaints) about someone else, the wisest course usually is to refuse to listen and withdraw.

Be careful not to judge the third party. Remember that seeing that person through another's eyes is subjective and may be due to a complete misunderstanding. Be objective and don't make the problem worse by taking on someone else's prejudices.

### **Be wary of giving advice**

In general, unless there is an obvious practical solution to a problem or you personally can provide a reliable contact through an agency or other competent professional help, be careful about giving any advice. Of course there may be nothing wrong with saying something along the lines of, "In a similar situation I found something that worked for me," but don't imply that this could be a quick-fix solution to another's problem.

Your solution may have worked perfectly well for you, but assuming someone else's problem exactly mirrors your own and that the person would implement your advice in exactly the same way with the same results, is simplistic thinking. It could even be dangerous. However alike the situations may seem, they can never be identical, and there are too many variables.

It's amazing how often a practical solution will present itself naturally in the course of the conversation, and if it comes from the person seeking help so much the better. We all tend to follow our own advice over someone else's.

Asking questions like "What are you hoping for?" or "What do you want to happen next?" often can focus the other person's mind on possible solutions or courses of action. Even if there is no obvious solution, as in the case of the loss of a loved one, simply being able to express and clarify feelings can open up other avenues of thought. These might lead to acceptance or a resolution in the future. The final goal often is simply peace of mind.

### **Does God believe in really listening?**

God is quite prepared to have someone listen to His side of the story and even reason with Him about a particular course of action. Remember, Abraham was a friend of God and so He decided to share His intentions with him about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 18:17-33). In effect Abraham was paraphrasing what God had said and, at the same time, tactfully questioning His intentions in a respectful manner. Abraham asked God: "Would You destroy the righteous with the wicked?" (verse 23). Verse 21 shows that God was analyzing the situation, and was therefore prepared to consider Abraham's viewpoint.

Moses used the same basic approach in Exodus 32 after the incident with the golden calf. God considered the points Moses made and changed His mind.



God is also prepared to listen to and to challenge humans. He invites sinners to reason with Him (Isaiah 1:18). The word "reason" here means to argue or debate. In the book of Malachi, God many times paraphrases what the Jews were saying, beginning with the words "Yet you say..." (e.g. Malachi 1:2). Here the Jews were given a chance to defend what they had said and if God had misunderstood them, they had an opportunity to explain what they really meant. More likely God's interpretation was correct but by using their own words, God challenged them to focus their minds on the attitudes and intents behind those words. It is quite probable they had not realised the deepest implications of what they were saying.

Christ used similar wording with the Pharisees in Mark 7:11: "But you say...." If that was not what they had said, then here was an opportunity to correct the matter. Again by paraphrasing what they had said, He focused their attention on the true intent behind their words.

### **Esteeming others**

Being prepared to take the time to listen, especially when someone is in distress, comes into the category of esteeming others better than ourselves and loving our neighbor as ourselves (Philippians 2:3; Matthew 22:39). To someone who feels hopeless, lost or bereaved, simply being able to express feelings or concerns to a willing and caring listener can be a great source of comfort.

Listening is a way of showing love to neighbor, of building bridges, perhaps of becoming a peacemaker. It is a skill we all should be developing and using now. The ability to listen will be essential in the future Kingdom of God and is a skill Christians should now be developing.

### ***Barriers to Listening***

These are a few of the most common blocks or barriers that prevent us from really listening to others:

- **Comparing:** You hear part of the story and start thinking, for example, "I wouldn't have done it that way" or "I would have...."
- **Mind reading:** You are trying to work out what you think the person is really feeling and thinking instead of listening to what he or she actually is saying.
- **Judging:** Not listening to what the person is saying at all, as you have already decided the person's position. This can also involve judging someone that the person is talking about, without hearing the third party's view.
- **Rehearsing:** You are busy planning your next comment, and are probably waiting for a gap in the conversation to jump in with it.
- **Filtering:** Listening to some things, maybe those that interest you, and not listening to others that don't.
- **Dreaming:** Half-listening, but something the person said has triggered a memory of your own, and you are really thinking about that.

- Identifying: Referring everything the other person says to an experience of your own.
- Advising: Trying to give a solution to the problem after a few sentences. If the person responds "Yes, but...", you probably haven't heard all the information.
- Parrying: You disagree so quickly the other person doesn't even feel heard. This can take the form of a put-down. For example, "Oh, I don't let that sort of thing bother me," where the other person's point of view is simply dismissed. People who can't take praise can also use parrying. Responding to an expression of gratitude with, for example, "It was nothing really" implies that the praise or appreciation is of no value to you. It is much better to respond "Thank you" or "You're welcome."
- Derailing: Changing the subject, because you're angry, bored, uncomfortable or can't be bothered. You might even turn it into a joke.
- Placating: Using words like "absolutely" and "incredible," where you sound pleasant and supportive, but you are not really involved.

In all these instances the listener is not giving the other person the attention and respect he or she deserves, and that the listener would expect him- or herself if the situation were reversed.

# Manage Your Family Finances The Bible Way

By Bruce Gore



**M**ONEY IS A NEUTRAL COMMODITY, neither inherently good nor evil. Whether money is a good or bad thing depends on our approach to it. Jesus Christ wasn't opposed to wealth or a high standard of living. He said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). The Bible is a guidebook toward that abundant life He wants us to enjoy. On the other hand, love of money has corrupted and twisted the lives of many men and women and is a root cause of much evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

The Bible has much to say about money and our family finances. Our Father inspired writers to include hundreds of verses in the Bible about how to handle money and possessions. The book of Proverbs contains a wealth of information on wise money management. Let's take a look at some of the sound financial principles it offers us.

## Our attitude toward money

We must not let money become overly important to us. One of the first statements in the book of Proverbs shows us that we should honor God, who owns everything. "Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase; so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine" (Proverbs 3:9-10). It is important that we return a portion of what we receive to the One who gave it.

The Master tells us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His

DISCOVER

righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). We must not allow physical possessions to become so important that pursuing them dominates our lives. Wealth can become intoxicating and enslaving. "Do not wear yourself out to get rich; be wise enough to desist" (Proverbs 23:4, NRSV).



The apostle Paul spoke of learning to be content with and enjoy the things that we presently have. "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition" (1 Timothy 6:7-9).

### **Integrity matters**

Earn it in such a way that you can sleep at night. God tells us, "The blessing of the LORD makes one rich, and He adds no sorrow with it" (Proverbs 10:22) and "Treasures of wickedness profit nothing..." (verse 2). We should earn our living honestly. Do not climb over the backs of others to make money. The book of Proverbs tells us: "Do not rob [or exploit] the poor because he is poor, nor oppress the afflicted at the gate; for the LORD will plead their cause, and plunder the soul of those who plunder them" (Proverbs 22:22-23).

Such shortcuts to gaining wealth are really only traps, says God. "He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches, and he who gives [bribes] to the rich, will surely come to poverty" (Proverbs 22:16). We are never to take advantage of another. When we give our employer an honest day's work, we are earning more than the day's wages. "Servants, in all things do the orders of your natural masters; not only when their eyes are on you, as pleasers of men, but with all your heart, fearing the Lord: whatever you do, do it readily, as to the Lord and not to men..." (Colossians 3:22-23, Bible in Basic English). God expects us to work for our employers as though we were working for Him.

### **Share with others**

"Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold what is due, and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water" (Proverbs 11:24-25, NRSV).

The Proverbs are filled with admonitions to share with others the wealth God has shared with us. "A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor" (Proverbs 22:9, NIV). Also, "He who despises his neighbor sins; but he who has mercy on the poor, happy is he" (Proverbs 14:21). "Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard" (Proverbs 21:13).

### **Wealth comes through diligence**

Too often people want to get something for nothing. They are looking for a shortcut to wealth. The luck of the lottery comes to only a rare few and sometimes brings more pain than pleasure. The surest way to financial security is through hard work. "He who tills his land will be satisfied with bread, but he who follows frivolity [chases fantasies] is devoid of understanding" (Proverbs 12:11). Perhaps you are familiar with more modern-day proverbs

such as "The harder I work the luckier I get" and "Success is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration."

We are told that one key to advancement is to develop our skills and then do the best we can at what we have been given to do. "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men" (Proverbs 22:29).

### **Properly manage what you have**

Once you earn money, you must properly manage your income. Otherwise it will soon be gone with little to show for it. "Be diligent to know the state of your flocks, and attend to your herds; for riches are not forever..." (Proverbs 27:23-24). Some people seem to perpetually have holes in their pockets. Their money goes out as fast as it comes in. They just can't seem to hang on to what they earn.

A good family budget helps to show what is happening to what we earn and can help us to see whether we need to make any adjustments in our spending. A simple way to hang on to more of what we earn is to be cautious about buying on credit. "The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender" (Proverbs 22:7).

### **Exercise financial self-discipline**

It's important to control our wants. "Death and destruction are never satisfied, and neither are the eyes of man" (Proverbs 27:20, NIV). There will always be something to want. Once one desire is fulfilled, the eyes will turn to something else. "The desire of the lazy man kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. He covets greedily all day long..." (Proverbs 21:25-26).

Perhaps you've heard this saying: "People are funny. They spend money they don't have to buy things they don't need to impress people they don't like." Don't let material pursuits cause you to live a life of deceit and pretense.

Financial success includes controlling our lusts and desires. "He who loves pleasure will be a poor man; he who loves wine and oil will not be rich. There is desirable treasure and oil in the dwelling of the wise, but a foolish man squanders it" (Proverbs 21:17, 20). It is hard for young people, in particular, to be patient. They immediately want and expect the financial security and material possessions their parents may have taken years to accumulate. Proverbs 28:20 cautions against such an approach: "A faithful man will abound with blessings, but he who hastens to be rich will not go unpunished."

### **True security**

There is no real lasting security in wealth. "He who trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will flourish..." (Proverbs 11:28). So many unforeseen events can wipe out material wealth overnight--an accident or natural disaster, a stock market crash, an extended illness, a criminal act. We need to keep in mind another modern-day proverb: "It is good to have money and the things that money will buy, but it is also good to make sure we haven't lost the things that money can't buy." The only real lasting security is a right relationship with our Maker. "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death" (Proverbs 11:4).

## **Recommended Reading**

These are only a few of the biblical statements and principles on the subject of finances. The Bible contains much more sound advice to help us find and maintain financial security. If you'd like to learn more, request your free copy of the booklet, [\*Managing Your Finances\*](#).

# Winning With Your Strengths

*If you're unhappy in your job, should you change your job? Should you find a career that matches your abilities and interests? Here's how concentrating on your talents can help you find happiness and success.*

**By Jerold Aust**



**J**AKE HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO PLAY college basketball. But he soon discovered that "there were better ball players selling popcorn and Cokes in the stands than some of us down on the basketball court. Once I figured that out, I readjusted the focus on my future."

Meet Jake. In 1956, at age 18, he excelled in high-school basketball. He averaged 30 points a game during his last two years of high school and was recruited by large and small universities. Jake was unusual in that he was only 6 feet tall but played center on his team. Fans got excited watching him play because he showed good timing, was quick, often outwitted his taller opponents and possessed an accurate soft jump shot.



He stood out in high-school basketball, but in college he found himself outclassed. College freshmen trying out for the teams needed height and superior ball handling. Jake soon rethought his future in athletics. He loved the game, but he couldn't realize his dream of playing college basketball, so what could he do? He did the smart thing and studied to become a basketball coach. Jake focused on something he could excel at, and success followed him. There is more to Jake's story.



## Well-meaning advisers

No matter who or what you are, somebody will be quick to advise you on your life's choices. Some unsolicited advice may be helpful, but much will not. A well-meaning mother wants her daughter to do what she never could. The well-meaning father expects his son to take over the family business. Sometimes daughters and sons do follow in their mothers' and fathers' footsteps and are perfectly happy and successful. But this is not always the case.

Advice is cheap, and it flows freely from family and friends. Some people have spent years following a particular professional path but wish they could start all over again down a different one. Does it do any good to regret the paths not taken, the opportunities lost? Not according to writers Carole Klein and Richard Gotti: "Regret, which is inextricably linked to choice, has become a major malady of modern life. The more options there are to choose from, the more options we must relinquish at the moment of choice. As we choose more, we give up more, and create more 'might have beens' " (Carole Klein and Richard Gotti, Ph.D., *Overcoming Regret: Lessons From the Roads Not Taken*, 1992, p. 10).

The Gottis quote French novelist and Nobel Prize winner André Gide, who advises: "It is a rule of life that when one door closes, another door always opens. Let us not, therefore, mourn so much for the losses behind the closed door that we miss the opportunities waiting for us beyond the newly opened door" (ibid., p. 9). Not all of life's opportunities are stored behind door No. 1.



Although people tend to nurse regrets over jobs they should have taken, you shouldn't be quick to change occupation, vocation or profession. Age, health, the economy, personal solvency, family and other important factors can weigh heavily in your decision to make such a significant change. Counselors advise seeking professional advice and talking with people who have found themselves in similar situations.

Many people who have caught the job-changing bug will not be deterred by sound advice. If you are one who is determined to embark on a new profession based on your native talents and abilities, you can profit from some time-tested guidelines. Following are some suggestions that can help.

This brief listing is not a one-size-fits-all panacea. Rather, think of these tips as food for thought.

### What natural talent?

At Gallup, Inc., pollsters studied 250,000 successful professionals. They determined "that the highest levels of achievement come when people are matched with activities that use their strengths" (Donald O. Clifton and Paula Nelson, *Soar With Your Strengths*, 1992, p. 21). Many people decide they want to do something enjoyable for a living. But sometimes that's easier said than done.

Sometimes a person's desire does not match his or her ability. In those cases, a lifetime can

be misspent struggling to seek satisfying success. Brian Tracy, who conducts seminars on identifying strengths, advises: "You can't hit a target you can't see. You can't accomplish wonderful things with your life if you have no idea what they are. You must first become absolutely clear about what you want" (Brian Tracy, *Maximum Achievement*, 1993, p. 21).

Some people do hone in on their target. They determine the tasks that come most naturally to them. They succeed in their newly chosen field. Determination, outside help and perseverance, along with happenstance, can make the difference when people match their life's pursuit with their natural abilities. Daytime television shows occasionally air such success stories, and it's exciting to see rags transform into riches when ability and activity match up.

*God lovingly and  
optimistically  
looks to our  
strengths, not our  
weaknesses.*

Former test pilot and United States Air Force general Chuck Yeager offers this advice about matching ability with a career: "...Pick something you enjoy doing. Forget the money angle, within reason. If you enjoy what you're doing, you'll adjust your lifestyle to meet your income. And if you enjoy it well enough, you'll be outstanding because you'll always like doing it" (Dennis Conner, *The Art of Winning*, 1989, p. 178).

Jake's example, of a short guy who loved basketball, supports Chuck Yeager's advice. In his first year of college, after realizing he might not excel in his chosen sport, he discovered he could apply his natural ability to a related field: coaching--rather than playing--basketball. Jake didn't complain that life wasn't fair. He took hold of other possibilities and prepared himself to succeed. His second-chosen field gave him more opportunities for his natural talents to grow.

### **Focus on your deepest desire**

Things change. Forty years ago a farmer, rancher or laborer made many of his own repairs. My father raised cattle and wheat, built his own house and repaired his farm equipment himself. He also supervised and maintained oil wells, keeping the pumps and motors in good working order.

But Dad also owned a shoe-repair business. He simply couldn't make a living on the farm. So my father, out of necessity, became a jack-of-all-trades and master of one. He knew enough about mechanics, plumbing and carpentry to get by on the farm, but he was a professional when it came to repairing shoes.

Jake also focused on what he did best. He wasn't a genius, yet he concentrated on being the best coach and teacher he could be. Twenty years later his peers designated him a master teacher and inducted him into his state's teachers' hall of fame.

### **Daily commitment**

The story goes that a young man interested in music was looking for Carnegie Hall in New York City. "Excuse me, sir," he inquired of an elderly gentleman on the street. "Would you be so kind as to tell me how I might get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Certainly, young man," responded the older man. "Practice, practice, practice!"

Consider Dennis Conner's perspective for winning in life. It was he who piloted the *Stars and Stripes*, which won back the 1987 America's Cup yachting-race title from the plucky Australians. In Conner's book *The Art of Winning*, he writes about "the 'commitment to the commitment.' I call it 'thinking big.' It means setting your sights on a goal that may seem unattainable, and achieving it" (Conner, p. ix).

Mr. Conner himself revealed his commitment in preparing for that incredible race in 1987: "Here's what it's like: You wake up every morning knowing that you must accomplish more than can possibly be done in the next twenty-four hours--more than you have ever done any other day of your life. You practice, and practice some more--always looking for a better way, always pushing at the limits of the possible. By the day of the first race, you know you have done everything you possibly can to prepare. You have taken away every possible excuse to lose" (Conner, page xv).

### **Managing your weaknesses**

Michael O'Brien authored *Vince*, a biography of a professional American football coach, Vince Lombardi. Mr. O'Brien wrote of Mr. Lombardi's attempt to instill confidence in his team, the Green Bay Packers. Preparing his team to defeat its archrival, the Detroit Lions, Mr. Lombardi showed films that focused only on successful running plays previously used against the Lions. His idea was that if his team concentrated on strengths rather than weaknesses, it had a much better chance of entering the coming game with confidence.

Although Vince Lombardi was considered a taskmaster of a coach, he understood how the mind works. He focused his team on its successes and didn't worry about its failures.

You can manage your weaknesses. Of course, some weaknesses should be overcome, not just managed. A weakness for shoplifting is different from a weakness for chocolate pastries. If you can't seem to get to work on time, you had better overcome that weakness or you may lose your job. If your problem is drug or alcohol abuse, you had better overcome your addiction, or your problem will overcome you.

But some weaknesses can be managed. A television writer had great difficulty because of dyslexia, which caused him to transpose letters and numbers. He did not attempt to overcome this debility. Rather, he hired an assistant to correct his writing, making each script appear as professional as its content. He found a way to manage one of his human weaknesses.

### **God focuses on your strengths**

Accentuating the positive--building on your strengths--is not just good business advice. It is also supported by the Bible. King Solomon admonished people to concentrate on their strengths: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Proverbs 13:19 tells us, "A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul."

Pinpointing and emphasizing your natural strengths and abilities are important, but an even greater principle, one with a spiritual aspect, comes into play. As a Christian, you must "seek

first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble" (Matthew 6:33, 34).

Seek God first. All other physical desires and needs can be met one day at a time. Although they may be important, they are secondary to seeking God's Kingdom.

Jesus Christ set us an example of prayer in the Gospel of Luke. That prayer directs our attention to the importance of receiving daily our physical and spiritual food: "Give us day by day our daily bread" (Luke 11:3).

The apostle Paul supports the day-by-day commitment to life's needs: "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). The focus here and throughout Scripture is on a Christian's daily commitment.

Finally, Scripture supports the effective management of weaknesses. Paul encourages: "[This] one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead" (Philippians 3:13). Paul had to live with the unpleasant memory of his persecution of God's saints. It would not have been hard for Paul to succumb to regret rather than positively offering his life as a profitable servant to others.

*Although people tend to nurse regrets over jobs they should have taken, you shouldn't be quick to change occupation, vocation or profession.*

God enjoys seeing humans succeed. Consider Job's example, cited by the apostle James: "Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord" (James 5:11). Anyone who frequently reads the book of Job notices the self-righteousness of Job. Yet, when God inspired James's use of Job as an example, James focused on only one aspect of Job's character: his perseverance. God could have inspired James to enumerate Job's shortcomings, but He didn't. God stresses Job's patience. God lovingly and optimistically looks to our strengths, not our weaknesses (Romans 8:31-33).

In this mortal life, you may have the tendency to live the dreams of others. Longing for what might have been can drain and damage. Besides, it is usually difficult to point to a single decision that set your life on the course you wish you could change. Your life is a composite of innumerable factors, some you could have altered, others you could have done nothing about.

Regardless, you should always seek wise counsel, especially before making a watershed decision affecting the direction of a vocation or avocation.

Whatever you decide, remember the importance of obeying God. Paul addresses this truth: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with [by doing] good" (Romans 12:21). God doesn't say focus on evil by attacking it directly. The best way to overcome sin is by doing good for others. Where good exists, evil vanishes.

## **Decided to fight**

Jake's positive example was enhanced by his ability to manage his weaknesses. Jake was an avid and locally renowned golfer, even though his body was racked with pain because of Hodgkin's disease. When Jake was 20 years old, his physician told him he should get his house in order because he would probably die in six months. Jake had a young wife. He had dreams. His future lay ahead of him, and he was anxious to share his life with others in his chosen profession. He decided he would not give up and die; he would fight for his life, marriage and hoped-for family.

And fight he did. In the 26 years of pain that followed, leading to his death at age 46, Jake accomplished much. Although he became addicted to prescribed drugs that he took for relief from his chronic pain, he managed his weaknesses so he could present free seminars to young people about the dangers of taking drugs.

Four times he went cold turkey off drugs. "Those were terrible times," he said. But he was committed to his goal in life, striving to share his life with young people. He fought the pain, often averaging two hours of sleep per night so he could continue teaching.

In his last years, a doctor inadvertently gave him too much chemotherapy, weakening his heart and adding stress to his already weak body. Still, he never gave up.

One evening I found Jake driving golf balls in a park. He told me he was hitting about 300 balls every evening as part of his physical therapy, and hitting all those golf balls had sharpened his game. It was at once shocking and inspirational to watch him press a golf ball and tee in the ground, then take hold of his thin legs with his arms and hands and position his legs so he could drive the ball straight down an imaginary fairway.

Before he died, Jake's physicians discovered a tumor growing around his spine that, when removed, forced him to dramatically adjust his walk by learning to swing his hips and legs so he could move forward. Seeing this once agile athlete reduced to near-immobilization was heartrending, to say the least. But he could still drive with unerring accuracy time after time. I marveled at his attitude, his singleness of purpose, his relentless determination while experiencing great discomfort, and I admired his deep desire to manage his weaknesses. He was a remarkable success in a short life. Jake occasionally remarked that it wasn't life that created his outgoing perspective; it was the prospect of death.

Jake had weaknesses, most of them brought on by his physical frailties, but he focused on his strengths. His example was both common and extraordinary. It was common because Jake was an ordinary person like you and me. It was out of the ordinary because Jake showed profound courage in the face of daily pain and the prospects of an early grave. Jake learned to live one day at a time because he knew the next day might be his last. Perhaps his greatest strength was that he recognized and accepted his natural talents and therefore proved an outstanding success.

You can win with your strengths, as did my brother Jake.

# Learning From the Suffering of Job

*The suffering of a man named Job explains much about why character is more important in God's eyes than the discomfort and pain we experience in this life.*

**By Roger Foster**



**J**OB, for whom the book of Job in the Bible was named, was a very wealthy man. He was also an exceptionally righteous man. He carefully avoided acts of transgression against God's laws. He behaved blamelessly. But he was not as righteous as he thought: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10)--like all of us, he had weaknesses. He was not perfect.

God decided to test Job's character to see how his commitment to Him would bear up under adversity. The account of Job is in Scripture to help people who are attempting to go God's way, but are beset by discouraging and traumatic experiences, to learn to trust God patiently while awaiting the resolution of their problems.

God boasted of Job's righteous behavior to Satan (Job 1:8). Satan responded, "...Stretch out Your hand and touch all that he has, and he will surely curse You to Your face!" (Job 1:9-11). Later events proved Satan wrong. Job's character was not that weak.

God granted Satan permission to strip Job of his possessions and his family and to afflict him with excruciating boils (Job 1:12-19; 2:6-7). Job at first accepted his plight, saying, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

Later "Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one

came... to mourn with him, and to comfort him" (Job 2:11). After a week of lamenting with him, they began to discuss his calamities and suffering. Job listed his complaints, showing the inequities of life. Later God agreed with him. Not everything in this life is fair and equitable.

Job's three friends, however, were certain that God was punishing Job for some secret sin, something Job could hide from everyone but God. Job vehemently denied that such was the case, and he was right. God later verified this also.

However, during his ordeal of loss and suffering, Job gradually came to resent God. This often happens to people in the midst of inexplicable calamity.

Many chapters relate the faulty reasoning and accusations of Job's three friends and Job's denials. Finally, one of Job's younger friends, Elihu, spoke up. He recognized that Job's perspective was flawed and distorted. Job had convinced himself that his afflictions served no purpose. He decided that God was simply not treating him fairly. Elihu realized that Job was so obsessed with his innocence (Job 33:8-9) that he was finding fault with God rather than looking for lessons to learn from his trials. To Job's complaints Elihu replied: "Do you think this is right? Do you say, 'My righteousness is more than God's'?" (Job 35:2).

Instead of seeing his adversity as opportunity for patience and for letting God mold him, Job had grown in his resentment toward his Creator. He closed his mind to the possibility that he could learn something valuable from his suffering.

Job's principal objection was that God was unresponsive to him, that He was not properly acknowledging his righteousness. But God is the one in charge, "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: Now prepare yourself like a man, I will question you, and you shall answer Me: Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (Job 40:6-8).

God then compared Job to Himself: "Have you an arm like God? or can you thunder with a voice like His? then adorn yourself with majesty and splendor, and array yourself with glory and beauty. Disperse the rage of your wrath; look on everyone who is proud, and humble him. Look on everyone who is proud, and bring him low; tread down the wicked in their place. Hide them in the dust together, bind their faces in hidden darkness. Then I will also confess to you that your own right hand can save you" (Job 40:9-14).

In the end Job saw that the basis of his problem was his lack of understanding and excessive confidence in his own righteousness. Then his view of God's fairness changed. He saw that His critical attitude toward God was wrong: "...I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3-6).

Job's experience is recorded in great detail so we can learn the folly of holding too high an opinion of ourselves. "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud" (Proverbs 16:18-19).

Job's experiences can explain why righteous people may go through discouraging and traumatic times and be tempted to resent God for not obviously and quickly intervening on their behalf. Like Job, we can fail to understand that God sees far more than we see.

No matter how severe a trial is, we should never assume God isn't listening or doesn't care. He sees lessons we need to learn that are beyond our present understanding. We need always to remember some excellent advice from King David: "Wait on the LORD; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD!" (Psalm 27:14). We should learn from Job's experience to maintain patient respect and trust in God even in the midst of our sufferings (James 5:10-11).



# Virtual Christian MAGAZINE *Letters to the Editor*

I would like to write a letter to the Editor

## Message in a Song

I decided to share this editorial with residents at the nursing home.

Let's not wait. We do not know what tomorrow brings. Let's tell our dads how much we love and appreciate them. This song brought tears to my eyes as my dad died 25 years ago. He was different, but oh so loving, but I didn't know how to hug and kiss him and tell him I loved him.

I am a 76-year-old mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and know now the importance of the word *love*. The word itself means nothing, but actions show what it is.

See God in everybody and manifest His love especially today on Father's Day. I will share this verse with many on my list.

Love,  
Gisele

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I just read "Message in a Song." It is good to tell our parents how much we love them, but what about when you tell them and soon, very soon, they say, "OK, that's enough!?" My mother died just a short time ago and this was her response. I think about this and come to only one thing. I had a willing attitude. Now "Pop" is left, my step dad...I do the best I can.

Thanks to God for His Church and thanks to you.

Jerri Anderson

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## Are You Missing Something?

Excellent suggestion. Keep up the good ministry work!

God bless,  
Sean

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## Serving as a Congregation

What a truly inspiring article on the woman who visited her son in prison and the congregation was so helpful! That truly made my evening.

Tony & Rochelle Brown

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Marilyn is a very warm and caring person herself and is a delight to be around. We love having her come and visit us. I wish it was on better circumstances with both being able to come and be with us instead of her son in prison. So being able to serve her and be her friend was a welcome lesson on serving others.

The Joyners

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### [Reading to Your Children](#)

I enjoyed Mr. Hooser's article on reading to your children. My 2-year-old granddaughter has loved Grandma reading to her for quite some time and, now that she has a new sister, she loves being able to "read" to her!!

Marilyn Braley

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### [The Battle of the Christian Soldier](#)

After reading your Web page I was overcome by the power of God as He works through each and every one of us. I have become compelled to battle against the three enemies of which you speak. I have seen the light of Christ and His disciples, and would like to learn more about how to fight in the face of my sinful surroundings.

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### [Bible Education for Our Little Ones](#)

Stan Cook did an excellent job.

Neal Brantley

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### [Even So, Come, Lord Jesus!](#)

I just read this inspiring article and, as usual, Janna says things that I feel but cannot express. I appreciate this insight she has and know that part of her purpose in life is to help others understand their own grief and pain, while writing is her own healing medicine. Thank you, Janna!

Sherry Buckbee

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Would you please tell Janna Thomas "thank you" for her April/May article? I needed it. My husband may live for years or he may die shortly. Whatever God decides. Even though I had a 4-year-old son who died 20 years ago, I needed a fresh perspective.

Jeannette Haskins

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### [Why Did Pamela Die?](#)

The article you printed about the loss of a newborn and the article in this month's magazine about dealing with death have really helped me. In 1990 my mother died on August 30 and then my first husband died on October 30. I remarried three years later and we had a baby girl nine months later. When she was 19 months old, I gave birth to a 9 lb., 9 oz. baby boy who had died before he was born. These events have changed the way I view life in ways that I believe cannot be understood fully unless experienced. Thank you for sharing real-life experiences.

Robin Mackowiak

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### Articles about Home and Public [Schooling](#)

Thank you so much for your article on home schooling. I have felt an urge to do this (it's NOT from me, because I don't have the temperament for it), but didn't know where all to get resources for it. I've got a lot of friends who home school, but I needed to have something to show my husband so we can make an informed decision about it. Thank you again for your article.

Suzanne Mills

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### General Comment

I am certainly happy to find your site. I just put in keyword "Christ" and found you. I thank the God who lives for that. There are so many myths about Christ, not only His birth, but every so-called Christian holiday. I mean rolling eggs, hot cross buns and a rabbit on Easter. All I can say is that we know all things work together for good, for those who love the Lord and the called according to His purpose.

Jessie Johnson