A $64,000 Question
By Bill Williamson

It was my second interview and I wasn’t as happy about it as I could have been. We had moved to Prineville, Oregon from LaPenita, Mexico where we had been with a mission group.

We had gone to Mexico at God’s direction. It had been a process of praying at intersections, moving to Hamilton, Montana, and then taking a church group for a building project. A year later it was clear that Judith, Will and I were to get rid of all the extra ‘stuff’ we had accumulated and relocate to LaPenita. But, that is another story.

We had come back to the states and again, the Lord’s direction took us to Prineville. I was looking for work, but little was to be found.

One job came up that I felt I was to try for. Now, I want to be clear, I did not want this job, but felt I could should not pass it up. It was my responsibility before God to work and provide for my family, unless God said otherwise. I was sure I needed to apply.

The job was a position as ‘Bus Driver,’ and that doesn’t sound so bad. But, the passengers would be mentally disadvantaged individuals from a care facility in Bend. They were adults, and extreme cases that often required diapers. They were under very tight supervision, care and protection.

As I entered the building for the first interview, I had my first encounter with some of the passengers. I tried to be interested, even loving, to the two or three that were nearest to me. One was unable to contain saliva in his mouth and it streamed down onto his clothes. It was also all over his hands where he had rubbed his mouth and face often. He put his hands against me and I backed away when the saliva was transferred to my clothing.

Was I prepared to take this job? That question plagued me for days. I had performed pretty well on the oral interview, but my reaction to the poor unfortunate people I would be working with didn’t gain me any points. I was sure I needed to overcome my obvious discomfort.

I was accustomed to a quiet time with the Lord every morning, and the most persistent situation I brought to God was the need for a job. Judith was an understanding wife who had spent many days lacking essential food needs and could handle it any day it was necessary. But, Judith’s son, Will, was a Junior in High School and we longed to provide a bit better situation for him.
Besides, it just takes more money than we had to make monthly ends meet.

I prayed often and told God I would take this job if he would give it to me. The hourly wage was extremely poor at $5.15 per hour, and wouldn’t add much quality to our lives. But, there was nothing else to be had and it would help put food on the table.

The truth was though, I didn’t want this job at all. I would take it if God insisted, but I secretly hoped that I would not be selected.

I was required to have another interview. The field had narrowed and I wasn’t so sure how I felt about that. On one hand it would be good to have income, but on the other hand I didn’t want ‘that’ kind of work.

I participated in the second interview and another week passed before the call came; I did not make the final cut. The other person had gotten the job.

I was thrilled. God had heard my inner heart cry and let me off the hook. But, I want to say, years later after Judith died and I married Maureen, we attended a church where a family had three disadvantaged children. I was nervous at first even being near them, but I overcame that and God showed me that I could love everyone, no matter their disadvantage. I loved those three and was eager to hug them and worked at conversing with them every time I saw them. God taught me what he would have taught me if I had gotten that job.

As thrilled as I was, I still had no job and things were getting tough. Judith and I had a wonderful marriage relationship and we got along well. And Will was a delight, and I considered him my son. But, on one particular day things were just a bit tense between Judith and me. It was nothing serious and I couldn’t even tell you why the air had tension in it. But the tension was there.

Judith and I met in the living room as we each passed through, and I asked, ‘Do you still want to go to the Bible Study tonight?’

Her answer was quick and to the point, ‘We better, we need to!’

Now, let me translate my question for you. What I really meant was, ‘I don’t want to go to the bible study tonight, do you?’

But her answer settled it. I knew she was right and I shook my head in agreement.

We were new in Prineville and we had attended that local church only once, but had learned they had a midweek bible study. We loved to gather with other believers to worship and study God’s word, so it was natural for us to want to go.

But on this day neither of us were feeling very spiritual, and going to bible study could just as easily have been skipped if it depended upon our desire to go. We both knew though, that this is exactly the time we needed to be with believers searching out the things of God. It would quickly turn us around whereby our selfishness of attitude would melt away.

And sure enough it did. The bible study was great, the people were awesome, and the snacks afterward were to write home about.

It was the last event of the evening when someone called out for prayer, and the rest of us were asked if we had any requests. I quickly shot my hand in the air and blurted out our need of a job. The prayers were nice and our need for work was addressed.

After the meeting we all scattered with our plate of treats in hand, and one man approached me and introduced himself as, Don. He asked what kind of work I did. I was a little bored with what my largest block of experience had been and just told him I was looking for something simple. But, he pressed me on my job experience.

I told him my career had been in the US Forest Service and I had worked in Roadway Engineering doing survey, design, contract preparation, project management, construction inspection,
and some other related tasks.

His face lit up as if someone had told him that he was about to get a pay raise, and said, ‘You’re just the guy we’ve been looking for.’

He went on to explain he was Deputy Supervisor for the local branch of the US Bureau of Land Management, BLM, and there was to be a large diameter gas pipeline placed across BLM lands in Oregon. The one qualified person they had for the project was himself retiring. Don had been searching for an qualified Environment Inspector to oversee the pipeline construction whenever it was occurring on BLM lands, but he had come up empty.

I was flabbergasted. I had been willing, although reluctantly, to take the $5.15 per hour job and had failed. Now I was facing an opportunity for a lot more money. Was God rewarding me for ‘just being willing?’ Willing to work for less. And willing to come to the bible study when we didn’t feel like it.

Don explained that they were prepared to offer the GS-11 level of pay, but the position wouldn’t be approved for a few weeks. I told him I had taken my early retirement from the Forest Service at the grade of GS-11. It was perfect. I qualified in every way.

He also said that they needed some survey and road location work done immediately but couldn’t do that because of the lack of funding until the Environmental Inspector job was approved some weeks in the future.

I told him I would be happy to work as a volunteer for a few weeks while they reviewed my application if it would help them out. He was happy with that offer and asked me to stop by his office the next day.

In his office, I filled out the job application, and the necessary paperwork to begin as a volunteer. I started right away locating a proposed road route into the John Day Canyon for recreational access. A young temporary employee was assigned to help me and we had a good time traversing the beautiful canyon and eventually had a proposed road location.

After several other interesting projects were completed, my job application was finally approved. It had been decided to reinstate my GS-11 grade, and at the top step of that grade from which I had retired from, $21.00 per hour, a good wage for 1992. By the way, I was actually reimbursed for the ‘volunteer’ work as well, only I received a lump sum at a later date.

After a week in Durango, Colorado receiving training in pipeline construction and associated environmental issues, I was back in Prineville and on the job.

The project involved burying a welded 42 inch steel pipe in the ground, and would begin in Alberta, Canada and terminate in Fresno, California. I would be responsible for ensuring that all environment issues were addressed according to contract specifications. Part of that was making sure that the land looked at least as good after the pipe was in the ground as it did before the construction began, a sizeable task, but feasible.

Most of the 167 miles of BLM land in Oregon that I would be covering consisted of hard lava flow laying only inches below the thin soil. Blasting a quarter mile of trench in one stretch would be the normal operation, and provided lots of excitement as lava rock shot hundreds of feet into the air with each blast. A set of two holes were drilled every four feet and then explosives were loaded into each set with a .025 second delay between sets. The affect was that of an explosive zipper as the blast raced across the prairie at a high rate of speed to the quarter mile point.

I was assigned a Jeep Cherokee equipped with phone and radio for communications. I was given authority to talk directly with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission in Washington DC, as needed to accomplish my job. I was to report to Don, as my week to week supervisor. I say
‘week to week’ because I only saw him every few weeks. I would however, print a weekly progress report and route it to him to keep him abreast of pipeline activities.

The job lasted nearly two years. I turned the last two months of wrap up over to an inspector that had been assigned to help me out. I worked twelve hour days, and six days a week the entire duration of the project. Many days I would work even more hours, twenty-one hours being my longest day. It was a great job with responsibility and proper authority to get things done, and lots of pay.

We bought Judith a yellow Jeep Wrangler so that she had good, and fun, transportation for that period. Will finished high school and moved to Bellingham to live with his sister and find work.

At the close of the pipeline project, all of our financial needs had been met and we had still accumulated $61,000 in our savings account. That’s quite a difference from the zero balance of two years earlier.

The money became very useful when Judith was diagnosed with lung cancer only a few months later, and the bills began to come in. We had another three and a half years together before the cancer took her life.

But, there was a question that was asked before this job offer was ever made, and it went like this. ‘Do you still want to go to the Bible Study?’

I had asked it.

Judith had the right answer, ‘We better, we need to!’

That was a $64,000 question, and it paid off even more than that when the right answer was given.

Thank you, Lord.