My foot on the old, well-worn shovel, I pushed hard into the packed clay of Charlie’s yard. The soil resisted so that the sole of my foot ached and the shovel twisted away from my pushing leg. What did I get myself into, I wondered?

Only the previous day had Peter talked to me about whether or not I wanted the job of digging this 165 feet of trench. It was needed to bury electric wire for Charlie’s new electric gate, and receptacles along his front fence for Christmas lights.

Peter asked me how long it would take me to hand-dig the trench. My response was, eight to ten hours, after I had taken time to think about it, and even dig a small test hole to see how hard the ground was. The spot I tested was not as hard as the one I was now trying to thrust the shovel into.

Peter had suggested to Charlie that I could dig it in twelve hours. Charlie expressed doubt that this could be done.

Now as I attempted to get a trench started in the dry site, I wondered if Charlie may be right. I could have been wrong, not only in the time it would take, but in the toll it would have on my body. I have always worked hard and was never afraid of the hardest of tasks. But now, at sixty-nine years old, I was beginning to see the need to slow down, and even forego such hard labor projects.

That first moment, and first thrust of the shovel, turned into many hours and many thrusts. Many times a pick would be necessary to break up the crusted clay before I could remove it with my well-worn No. 2 shovel. I had become so accustomed to the feel of the ‘No. 2’ over the years that I would always opt for it, even when a newer, more streamlined, one was offered.

I had sharpened my old ‘No. 2’ this very morning to enable it to penetrate the ground easier, and midway through the morning the sharpened edge found Charlie’s irrigation tubing hidden just below the soil in an area where there was supposed to be none. Three times I found such tubing and severed or punctured it where it would need repaired.

I pressed on into the heat of the afternoon before I made a trip to Home Depot and purchased the necessary items for the irrigation system repair and returned to make the system whole again. Two hours were lost to digging before I could again start trenching.

It was midmorning of day two when I got back to the trenching. I was now at the point of trenching across one of the two hardened driveways. I could only gain inches at a time through the
rock hard clay that lay beneath the wheel tracks of the driveway. I encountered buried railroad ties underneath each of the two driveways the trench needed to cross. When Charlie saw my discovery he said a backhoe would come and remove them. He said they were part of an old cattle-guard.

I had brought my five-foot steel bar and I used it to pry the old ties out of the ground, not without a lot of straining and digging around them to loosen them. I then continued to the end of the 165-foot trench. I tied a bandana around my forehead, under my straw hat, in order to catch the sweat that poured from my brow in the intense Arizona sun.

It was my twelfth hour of digging that I did reach the end. And it felt so good to be finished. After taking the two hours out for the irrigation repair, I had done the digging in ten hours. I had taken no breaks, used only 20 minutes of my half hour lunch break, and pressed myself hard to get the job done. I had meticulously scraped all the fine gravel off the surface prior to digging and arranged it in a neat row to be placed back over the backfilled trench once the wire was in place. I also carefully dug out a bunch of daffodils and placed them in wet soil for later replacement.

The pace I chose for this labor was common. I was given a very good work ethic by my father while very young. My first payroll job, with a social security card, was when I was eight years old. My task then was to pull weeds from commercial truck farm rows of beans, peas, etc. The rows were 1/4 mile long and we were paid by the row. A 1/4 mile seemed unattainable to me as an eight-year-old. But, my mom worked side by side with me and encouraged me by bragging on my work. By the end of the week I had earned a check of $5.64, my first payroll earnings and my first contribution to Social Security.

Why do I, sixty-one years later, still remember the amount of that check? Well, I might have the penny portion wrong, but I will never forget holding that payroll check in my hand. Something was instilled in me, and I believe it must be my father’s urging to work hard and do a good job. My mother’s encouragement and bragging added much to my desire to please an employer also. I thank both mom and dad for their input into my life. My work ethic has served me well.

Now, let’s get back to Charlie’s trench.

Another day came and with the trench completed, I now inserted the underground rated electrical wire into the trench from the corner of the house where the electrical panel was located, to the far end of the trench near the main gate. I began covering the wire, waiting for the return of Peter and Charlie.

I spent another six hours covering the trench, replacing the fine gravel over the disturbed site. I was careful to level the site and blend the surface to look as though no digging had ever been done. I replanted the daffodils, and then offered my assistance to Peter, who had arrived and was making electrical connections at the panel. Once he was finished at the ground level there, I covered the last of the trench and excused myself for the day.

My body ached from the intense labor of the two days. A hot shower, topped with Ibuprofen, helped silence the cries of my sixty-nine-year-old muscles.

It was later in the night that I was suddenly awaken from my precious sleep when my left leg fell into a hard cramp that caused me to jerk my leg violently in an outstretched movement. The pain was intense and the outstretched position didn’t help like it usually would. Maureen jumped from the bed at the sound of my involuntary cries from the pain. I urged her to manipulate my foot and toes to try and alleviate the pain. Nothing seemed to help.

In the midst of this struggle to gain freedom from the agony of my left leg, my right leg also lurched into a cramp. This created a scene of agony that was evident from my cries that filled the room. Poor Maureen was trying to manipulate both legs at the same time to bring me some relief from my misery.
Finally I said, ‘pray for me, sweetie.’ Maureen did pray, and moments later the pain began to subside and the tension began to leave my legs. Residual aches stayed with me for hours, even into the next day, as the muscles recovered from the stress.

Given the night of the cramp ordeal, I pondered my course of action for the future in regard to such hard labor. I felt that I was too old for this continued level of hard work. I came to the conclusion I would dig no more extensive trenches that someone younger and fitter could better handle.

In the meantime, Peter informed me that Charlie was pleased with the job we did, and wanted us to bury another electrical wire to a distant shop and RV parking area. Peter asked me if I was interested in the digging that trench. My initial thought was a very negative one. In fact this thought continued for more than a week.

The length of the new trench seemed to be as long as the first one. It would lay behind the back of the house, cross a rock armored slope, descend into a drainage ditch, pass underneath a sprawling Juniper tree, and then ascend up to the shop building. Hardpan would likely be encountered in the drainage ditch, the large rocks would have to be moved, and many roots would be found under the tree.

The answer was obvious to me. At the next opportunity I told Peter that I would not dig the trench and that he needed to rent a trencher or backhoe. Peter was sure a trencher would not work because of the slope involved.

I held my position on not digging the new trench, and in the meantime was painting a neighbor’s house. Sunday came around and the phone rang. It was Peter asking if he could come with my pay for Charlie’s trench. He did come, and placed a wad of bills in my hand. I didn’t look at it, but went into the house.

I didn’t have to check the money Peter paid me for jobs because he was always accurate, even given me the benefit of a few extra dollars most times. A short time later when I unfolded the bills I found more than anticipated. I had worked two jobs that had not been paid at this point. The amount of the money in my hand was too much for one of the jobs, but too little for both the jobs.

I called Peter. I stated that if he were paying for one of the jobs, it was too much, but too little for both. He commented that it was only for Charlie’s job, and also said he had always paid me $20 per hour. I told him my records all show that he was paying $15 per hour. We both stuck to our belief for a few moments before we let it lie.

The bottom line was to be that Peter was now paying me $20 per hour, up from the $15 he had been paying. It came as a surprise to me. I had not campaigned for a raise, not even asked for one.

A moment later Peter asked if I would reconsider digging the trench for Charlie. I said I would not. He then said Charlie really wanted me to dig it because of the good job I had done, not only in digging the trench, but in the backfilling and care used to make the grounds look like no trench had been dug. He added that Charlie had asked him to offer me $25 per hour if I would reconsider and dig the trench.

This new development caused me to pause and think about it . . . and then stated that I could not pass up this opportunity. I consented to digging the new trench for the new wage.

All of my life I had gone the extra mile in all the work I had undertaken. I would make every effort to make the site look better when I left than when I arrived. This effort often went unnoticed and unappreciated. I had even been denied return of security deposits on rental properties after improving the home in every way while renting it.

There most often was no reward for doing a good job, or taking care of another’s property. But, I never waivered in trying to do well. I grew accustomed to receiving nothing extra for my
efforts.

I did know though that in God’s Kingdom. It was different. God always saw, He always knew, He always had a reward. The good deeds done by the born-again-believer are always noticed by God. He would one day place that crown on our heads, and our reward would be realized.

This trench of Charlie’s seems to be only an example of what God will do. He will see, and he will act.

I can only say that God is good and has elevated what I did from my heart to a place of recognition and reward.

Thank you, Lord. But, there was another trench to dig. Help me, Lord.

The day soon arrived when I would begin the second trench. The length turned out to be approximately one hundred forty feet, shorter than the first one.

I received a call from Charlie to come and show him exactly where the trench should be so that he could place the soaker hose on the site to soften it for digging. I did so and he began the soaking. I asked him to soak no longer than two days so that it would not become a mud bog.

I returned three days later and started the work. The ground was soft and my sharpened ‘No. 2' shovel slid easily into the damp clay. The trenching went much quicker than the earlier one that had not been soaked. By noon I had one hundred feet dug, with the flexible conduit inserted into the trench.

After lunch I dug the remaining forty feet, placed the conduit into the trench, and covered it.

As I was raking out the ground surface over the covered trench, I heard Charlie yelling to me, ‘Bill, come over here.’ I dropped my rake and ran to the side of the house where he was. There, lying in the driveway in front of him, was Bull Snake about the length of my No. 2 shovel. He was basking in the sun and didn’t seem to know what all the fuss was about. Charlie nudged him with a small dead limb that had fallen from a nearby tree. Under Charlie’s guidance, the snake turned and disappeared under the Boston Ivy that covered a large section of his yard.

The Bull Snake, rightly called, ‘Gopher Snake,’ is not a dangerous snake and is coveted by some as a good thing to have around, as they eat mice, rats, and other rodents.

The excitement melted away and I returned to put the finishing touches on the disturbed ground. Charlie wrote out a $200 check for the eight hours of work, which I placed neatly in my wallet. I fired up our little Inferno Red PT Cruiser and pulled from his driveway, tired and sore, knowing a hot shower and Ibuprofen awaited me at home.

The second of Charlie’s trenches had been much easier than I had feared. The toughness of the first trench had caused me to believe the second would be mostly impossible for me to dig at my age. God’s favor had been with me on the first trench, a favor that enabled me to get through the ordeal. His favor had been on me for the second one, and enabled me to do it without so much struggling, and at a much better rate of pay.

I’m no worse off for having dug the two trenches. In fact, I put several hundred dollars into our savings for an Israel trip coming in September. I too, learned that God’s grace can enable us to overcome all things. Thank you, Lord.

I’m thankful too, for Charlie’s Trench.