

THE GIFT OF JOY

Stella was upset. For several weeks she had been looking forward to going to the beach with her family and friends, and now this! She watched her younger sister, Priscilla, scamper to the back of the van to help unload, and her irritation grew. *Priscilla always manages to be cheerful about everything!*

Stella grabbed her sweater, shoved the beach toys into the bag, and headed toward the sand.

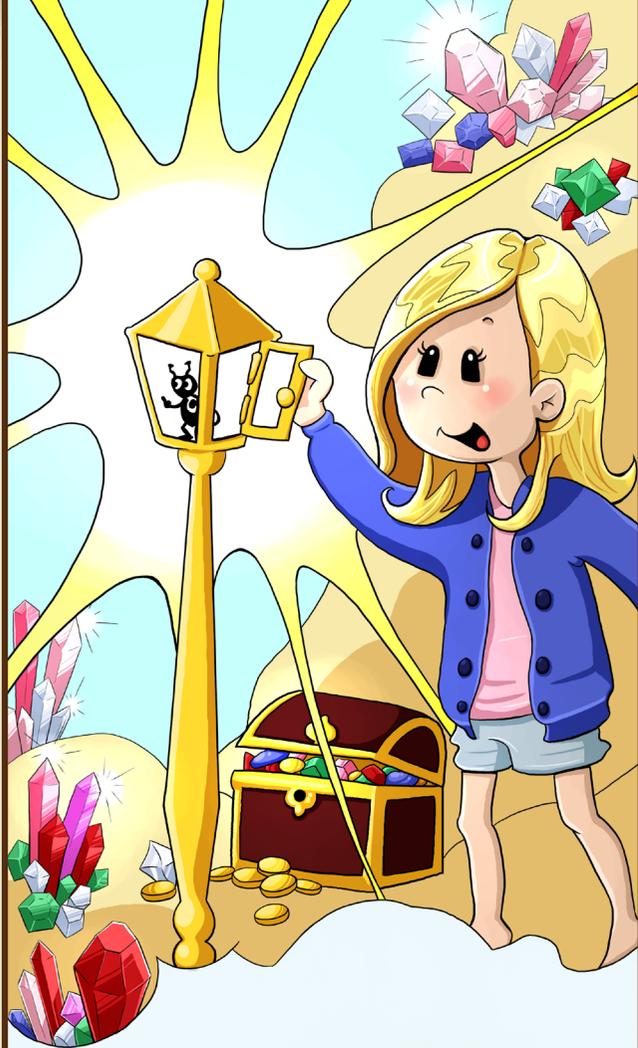
A cool wind was whipping up the waves, and Stella was reminded of foamy milk on top of hot cocoa. *It would be fun to swim in a sea of chocolate milk*, she thought. But then she remembered the irritation she'd been feeling before and

concluded, *The dumb wind and waves. Now we won't be able to go swimming because it's too cold and rough!*

Stella plopped herself down on the sand, while everyone else quickly became absorbed with other activities. Joel, Priscilla, and Dina were playing an impromptu game of catch, and David was examining a weather-beaten log for signs of life in its crevices.

After a few minutes, Stella's parents gathered the kids together to discuss what to do, since the weather was too cold for swimming. Joel suggested that they pray and ask the Lord to clear up the weather. They all thought this was a good idea. Her mother reminded them that even if the weather didn't change, Jesus could still make this a fun event for them.





As they prayed together, Stella found it hard to concentrate. *Hrmph*, she thought, as she kicked at the sand.

Afterwards, the other children happily took off to find supplies to build a fort made of towels and bamboo rods where they could eat and play and be protected from the weather. Stella, still seated, continued to shuffle sand through her toes, and her glumness increased. After a few minutes of staring at her toes, she pulled her legs toward her, rested her head on her knees, and drifted off to sleep.

Stella dreamed she was in a dark cave, walking along a path lit only by the light that came in through the mouth of the cave. The farther into the cave she went, the less she could make out her surroundings. In the distance she spotted a tiny, flickering light.

As she neared the light, she discovered it was a little firefly sitting on a rock. Next to the rock was a small glass lantern on a long pole.

Stella opened a small door on the side of the lantern and placed the firefly inside. Immediately the entire cave was lit with a beautiful, bright light. The room was filled with beautiful jewels, which covered the rocks and floor of the cave, as well as beautiful paintings and tapestries hanging on the cave walls. Stella felt happy and excited as she picked up one of the jewels. ...



Stella woke up just as a soccer ball hit her in the back. "Joel!" she yelled, and laughed, as she picked up the ball and went running after him. The kids kicked the ball around the sand for nearly an hour. Exhausted, they threw themselves down on the beach near their fort and began looking for shapes in the clouds.

"There's a rabbit."

"And there's a limousine."

"And that one looks like an elephant waving its trunk in the air."

"Over there it looks like a birthday cake with candles." And on they went, laughing and having fun describing the shapes they detected in the clouds. They were having such a great time that Stella had forgotten about the cold wind and the lack of sun that had supposedly ruined their day at the beach.

Stella jumped up from the sand and skipped along the water's edge, while thanking Jesus for giving her such joy and apologizing for being so glum earlier. As she reflected on His love for her, she heard His voice speak to her heart.

"The dark cave was like your heart when you were so glum," Jesus told her. The firefly you found in the cave was like the gift of joy I have for you. Sometimes you forget about Me and the joy I wish to give you, because you are focusing on what seems negative or sad.

"As you give praise to Me, the joyfulness that comes from My love will light up your life, and you will then see the treasures I have for you. Even in upsetting or difficult situations I always have treasures of love and happiness for you."



Stella felt glad, and she wanted to express her thankfulness to Jesus for helping her to remember this important lesson.

“Thank You, Jesus, that I have ten toes to feel the sand with. I’m thankful that I can run and jump and even swim when it’s not cold! Also, Jesus, thank You for how fun it has been to do something different today, even if we can’t swim. I’m very happy to get to do something with my friends. Also, we brought fun snacks to eat. ...”

At first Stella had thought she’d have a hard time coming up with more than a couple of things to thank Jesus for, and now she couldn’t stop!

Suddenly, she noticed something special had happened.—The wind had stopped. The ocean was now calm. She looked up and saw that the clouds were parting and the sky was bright and blue. “Hurray! We’ll get to swim after all!” Stella did a wobbly cartwheel that landed her on her bottom instead of her feet. She laughed, brushed off the sand, and then ran back to the others, to make sure that they noticed the improvement in the weather too.

The great thing about it, she thought, is how I became happy even before I knew it would be the perfect beach day. It doesn’t matter what’s happening around me, I can still focus on the joy and light Jesus has put in my heart.

