

## Take a Step

Life's a fascinating school with countless lessons tucked in it. Some I've learned as a matter of course; others have frustrated all my attempts to comprehend. I've raised my hand time and again in life's classroom, longing for answers. I've scrutinized its textbook, yearning to understand. I've walked its hallways and climbed its stairs, searching for its meaning. Perhaps you have, too.

We learn many life lessons when times are good and circumstances easy. Others we learn in seasons of hardship, loss, and darkness. Although suffering can be the harshest headmaster, it often equips us to reach our loftiest expectations. In the adversity we dread we discover life of which we've only dreamed.

God began teaching me this lesson as a high-school sophomore in 1979. For months, I sensed my eyesight deteriorating. I was amazed at how easily classmates navigated crowded hallways—even dark stairwells. Why was I the only one bumping into schoolmates or lockers? I couldn't understand how teammates caught the softball so easily. I stood in right field, glove in hand, stared intently at the ground, and tried to see the approaching ball's shadow. Then I listened for its landing and hoped I could find it. My math grades dropped because I couldn't tell a 3 from an 8; I hadn't read my locker number for months.

Though difficult to admit, I realized this wasn't normal. I began to feel more awkward and self-conscious. At last I told my mother who immediately took me to an ophthalmologist. He eventually referred me to Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. After several days of testing, the doctors told us that I had retinitis pigmentosa, a disease that slowly eats away the retina—no cure, no way to correct damage already done. I had lost so much vision that, at 15, I was already legally blind. My retinas would continue to deteriorate until I was totally blind.

*Blind ... totally blind.* The words sounded so final. So certain. So cold. I felt a chill inside that I'd never felt before. Nothing else was said. Silence fell on that room like shadows falling just before night. It shrouded us as we left the hospital, walked across the parking lot, got in the car, and journeyed home.

The news was probably harder for my parents than for me. My eyes were losing sight, but their hearts were being crushed. Can you imagine the heartache? How difficult it is to watch your child suffer and feel helpless to prevent it.

My dad piloted us home through the Miami streets. My source of wisdom, my counselor, comforter, and rescuer, I trusted him completely. Even though he'd also been my pastor, 20 years of ministry had not prepared him for this. I wonder if he thought, *Dear Lord, how can I fix this?* On the ride home, he was silent.

I could feel Mother's broken, tender heart and imagine her willingly trading her comfort to ease my suffering. My mom was my cheerleader, encourager, mentor, and friend. She must have wondered, *Will she be safe?* She too was silent.

Though normally strong-willed, trusting, sensitive, and talkative, that day I was silent. I remember my heart swelled with emotion and my mind raced with questions. *How will I finish high school? Will I ever go away to college? How will I know what I look like? Will I ever get a date or a boyfriend? Will I ever get married?* I remember feeling my fingertips and wondering how people ever read braille.

With almost five years of piano lessons stretched over eight, listening to me practice couldn't have been pleasant. Let's just say that I was a little short on natural talent! I did, however, practice diligently every night after dinner because if I did, I was excused from clearing the table and washing the dishes.

This time was different. Once home, I sat down at our old, stately piano with its warm, comforting sound. I began to play by ear a melody that I'd never played before. My fingers followed a pattern along the keyboard that was new to me ... yet somehow familiar. I played, "It Is Well with My Soul."

Perhaps God guided my heart and hands to play that hymn. Perhaps it was a miracle that I played by ear for the first time that day, but the real miracle was that it actually was well with my soul. Even as I mourned my loss, I looked into my Teacher's heart, recalled His Word, and remembered His character. These allowed me to say, "Whatever my lot ... it is well with my soul."

Today I still play by ear. I listen to books on tape, walk with a cane, and rely on others to drive me. I know the trappings of blindness and understand the isolation and hardships it can bring. Blindness can be painful—all life's heartaches are—but through it, God has taught me the greatest lesson in the school of suffering: Even when it is not well with our circumstances, it can be well with our souls. That was the first and greatest lesson I learned in the dark; it forms the foundation for all the lessons that have followed.

"When peace, like a river,  
attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea  
billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou  
hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well  
with my soul."<sup>1</sup>

**Textbook Treasures**

“Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;  
 my hope comes from him.  
 He alone is my rock and my salvation;  
 he is my fortress, I will not be shaken”  
 (Ps. 62:5-6).

“When I said, ‘My foot is slipping,’  
 your love, O LORD, supported me.  
 When anxiety was great within me,  
 your consolation brought joy to my soul”  
 (Ps. 94:18-19).

**Prepare to enter the classroom:**

Read Hebrews 11. Record every person’s name  
 you find in that chapter.

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**Day One**

# A Steady Pace

My friend and I stood in my new home exchanging decorating ideas. When I commented on how much I love the wallpaper in the bath, there was an awkward pause.

“But Jennifer ... how do you know you love the wallpaper if you can’t see it?” It was a fair question.

I told her my mother had vividly described the Jacobean print to me, and that through her every word, I could see the honey mustard, cranberry, and forest green colors twining through the vines and leaves in my mind’s eye. And I loved what I “saw” there.

That’s how I like to explain faith. The dictionary says that faith is a firm belief in something for which there is no proof—a belief that does not have to rest on visible evidence. My eyes can’t see my wallpaper’s design, but it’s still there. I know it’s there; my eyes don’t have to confirm what I know is real. In fact, it’s so real that even though I can’t see it, I still enjoy and delight in it.

Perhaps that’s what the writer of Hebrews thought as he wrote, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1, NKJV).

List two things you learn about faith from reading Hebrews 11.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

Reread Hebrews 11:1. Pause for 5 minutes (really!) to memorize this verse and meditate on its meaning.

Now, paraphrase the verse to help your non-Christian friends better understand faith:

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With this understanding of faith, we can exercise it with the same confidence as the apostle Paul who said, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7, NASB).

Read in your Bible the words of Hebrews 11:13. Write the verse in your journal or on a card. Read it often to encourage you to continue to live by faith.

Walking by faith is living in a reality not yet seen. Relying on sight—as paradoxical as it sounds—blinds us to God’s best. By sight, we step over God’s hidden treasures that only the eyes of faith can see. Most of us never learn to walk by faith until we learn to walk in the dark. We don’t lean on God until fear makes us feel shaky and weak.

List below three situations or needs in which you are walking in the dark. Circle the number that best describes any fear you are feeling (1=no fear and 10=total terror).

1. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
2. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
3. \_\_\_\_\_ 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Remember this list. You’ll be working more with your feelings and these situations.

When my world went dark and my fears were many, I learned that unless we trade our fear for faith, we may never find the treasures hidden in the dark. I found my future husband when I chose to risk walking in the dark. Likewise, our spiritual walk is often scary. God usually doesn’t reveal what’s next, and we can’t begin to anticipate what the future holds.

As a loving Father, God says, “You must take a step. I’ve prepared you to go, and deep down you want to walk by faith.” Like the faith-filled heroes of Hebrews 11, when we do step out, we find the treasures that God has reserved for those who lean completely on Him.

One way God teaches us to walk by faith is through the Bible’s examples of faith that we are to follow. In fact, Paul writes, “Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us” (Phil. 3:17, NASB).

When we step out in faith,  
we find the treasures God  
has reserved for those who  
lean completely on Him.

Make your own hall of faith, listing the names of your spiritual mentors or role models. Beside each name, write a two-word phrase that describes their faith, such as *constant prayer* or *seeks God*.

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The amazing folks we meet in the Hebrews 11 hall of faith knew how to walk by faith, not by sight ... and they learned to do so by walking in the dark. They didn't understand God's plan when they began to carry it out, and they didn't know what was coming after their first steps. Their faith became real as they exercised it—as they put one spiritual foot in front of the other. They chose to rely on something greater than sight or understanding, and they can teach us how to walk with them on that path of faith.

Noah teaches us to go against common sense when we sense God in an uncommon way. Imagine if he had relied on sight rather than faith. Instead of building an ark, he might have opened a petting zoo!

Abraham teaches us to willingly obey even when we don't understand. If he had been relying on sight as he trudged up Mount Moriah, he might have been scanning the bushes for a lamb instead of obeying God; or he might not have started up the mountain at all.

Sarah teaches us that it's possible to believe the impossible. Surely it was not sight that prompted her to knit tiny baby blankets at her age!

Moses teaches us to value God's reward more than man's riches. If he had been walking by sight, he probably would have milked his position as Pharaoh's grandson for all its royal worth.

Walking by faith

means taking a risk ...

taking a step ...

there's no other way.

You get the idea. Faith prompted Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, and the other heroes of Hebrews 11 to live the way they did. Faith prompted their seemingly peculiar behaviors which led them through God's plan ... in God's way. But walking by faith isn't easy. Each of them surely went through some internal agony along that walk of faith.

Noah experienced it, pounding one more nail into a ship in the middle of the desert. Sarah felt it with a baby's tiny kick in her once-sterile womb. Abraham knew it when he lifted that gleaming blade heavenward, ready to plunge it into the chest of his beloved son. (Who can imagine the agony and terror of that moment?)

Moses felt so out of his league that he begged God to send his brother Aaron to plead with Pharaoh. I can just hear him: "God, I stutter like M-M-Mel Tillis, but Aaron—he sings like M-M-Mel Tormé!"

The ground shakes beneath us when we step out in faith. But even if we feel insecure, walking by faith means taking a risk ... taking a step ... there's no other way.

You've just reviewed four Hebrews 11 heroes—Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and Moses. Which faith walk is most remarkable to you? Explain your answer:

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**FOR EXTRA CREDIT:**

Read more about the hero you identified above:

Noah—Genesis 6:1-9:17

Abraham—Genesis 12:1-5; 15:1-21; 18:1-15; 21:1-7; 22:1-19

Sarah—Genesis 16:1-15; 17:15-21; 18:1-15

Moses—Exodus 2:1-25; 3:1-4:31

Now, answer the following questions:

Through what darkness did he or she walk?

What else do you learn about faith from his/her experience?

What do you learn about God's activity and plan for his/her life?

What application can you make in your own life from all you've just noted?

**Day Two**

## A Confident Stride

Learning to walk on my college campus was easier knowing my mobility coach Mike was with me. If I felt wobbly, I held on to him. If I reached out or cried out, he was there. He would quickly extend his arm when I lost my footing or became disoriented. He made it possible to risk walking with a cane.

In the same way, we can hold on to God when we feel shaky in our faith walk. God Himself walks among us because we are His people (Lev. 26:12). His strong arm is always there to help us; we can reach out for Him in the dark and find Him there every time (Ps. 16:7-11). Just as Mike patiently listened to my fears, God will patiently listen to ours (Ps. 66:17-19).

Read the three Scriptures referenced in the paragraph above. Then finish this statement: "I can walk by faith with confident stride because ..."

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Learning to walk by faith is much like learning to walk in the dark. The mobility techniques Mike taught me gave me security in my physical stride, and they're also necessary in our faith stride. Consider the following tips for spiritual mobility.

## Remain Centered

As I learned to maneuver with my cane, Mike stressed the importance of remaining centered. He showed me how to hold my cane in the center of my body. Then, with a steady arm, I would move my wrist from left to right. I did this in order to walk in a straight line and stay oriented. It allowed me to tap the sidewalk with the tip of my cane just before my next step, helping me anticipate any changes in my path.

It's essential that I remain centered to stay oriented. Likewise, we must keep God at the center of our spiritual walks. God desires always to be in the center of our lives.

“Now, O Israel, what  
does the LORD your God  
ask of you but to fear  
the LORD your God, to  
walk in all his ways, to  
love him, to serve the  
LORD your God with all  
your heart and with all  
your soul.”

### Deuteronomy 10:12

Respond honestly. What is the center of your life? What's most important to you?

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If it is not God and your relationship to Him, what must change for God and His plan to become the center of your life?

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It's essential to remain centered as we learn to walk by faith. Losing our center will lead us astray. “Let your eyes look directly ahead, And let your gaze be fixed straight in front of you,” Solomon advises. “Watch the path of your feet, And all your ways will be established. Do not turn to the right nor to the left; Turn your foot from evil” (Prov. 4:25-27, NASB).

Being centered keeps us on our intended path. When we keep God as the center of our lives, we won't become disoriented when life casts its deep shadows. When every step is steady, we won't slip, even when the ground buckles beneath us. “My steps have held fast to Thy paths,” says the psalmist. “My feet have not slipped” (Ps. 17:5, NASB).

## Follow a Mental Map

I also learned it was essential to know exactly where I was going. No aimless strolling when you are blind! Mike told me to think through my path before I took the first step, to have a map locked in my mind. Knowing where I was going made every step purposeful and prevented missteps and mishaps. The map for Christians is God's Word, and when “the law of his God is in his heart; His steps do not slip” (Ps. 37:31, NASB).

When we know God's precepts, they guide us: "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD" (Ps. 37:23, NKJV). God's precepts also protect us. The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God, a part of the armor of light that protects us against the dark powers of the world (see Eph. 6:12,17; Rom. 13:12). This world is dark and shadowed at times. If we naively step out unprotected, we'll be susceptible to the evil influences of darkness around us. But if we wisely follow the map God has given us in His Word (no aimless wandering!), it will guide and protect us, making each step of our walk intentional. Then we too can say, "I run straight to the goal with purpose in every step" (1 Cor. 9:26, NLT).

Read Psalm 37:23; Romans 13:12; 1 Corinthians 9:26; and Ephesians 6:12,17.

Choose the Scriptures you most need to apply to the three walking-in-the-dark situations you identified in day 1. Record the reference next to each situation on page 11.

Pause to thank God for who He is and what He does in your behalf.

## Listen to the Teacher

When I was learning to use my cane, Mike taught me to tune in to the music of motors. I could hear the difference between the sound of a car's engine when it was in full motion and when it was idling. Learning to recognize what was coming (and how fast) helped me know when it was safe to go and when I'd better stop and wait.

We are fortunate when we walk by faith, for we need to tune in to only one sound—the voice of our Teacher. The prophet Isaiah reminds us that we are all like sheep who wander off and need a shepherd (53:6). But to hear the voice of our Shepherd above the din of all other noises in our lives, we must be tuned in to hear His still, small voice.

Jesus said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). His sheep hear and follow Him because they are familiar with His voice. When we learn to discern the Holy Spirit's voice, we'll know when to go and when to stop: "Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'" (Isa. 30:20-21).

When and where are you most likely to hear the Master's voice?

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What one thing would help you hear His voice more often and with more understanding?

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Attempt to implement this change at least once this week. You will have an opportunity to tell about your attempt during the group meeting.

Jesus said: “ ‘I am  
the light of the world.  
Whoever follows me  
will never walk in  
darkness, but will  
have the light of life.’ ”

**John 8:12**

Jesus said, “ ‘God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth’ ” (John 4:24). Walking by faith means that we allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate our eyes so that we can see beyond the here and now. Eyes of faith see every problem as solvable because they see every problem as spiritual in nature. What is merely physical is confined by the laws of nature, but what is spiritual has no confines except those our supernatural, sovereign God chooses.

As we walk by faith, the Holy Spirit helps us fix our eyes on the source of our help instead of the sting of our problems. He gently reminds us, “now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12, NASB). Someday the faith by which we walk will become sight. Or, as St. Augustine put it, the reward of our faith will be to see what we believe. How important it is to walk by faith! Look where it will lead us—face to face with God Himself!

### Day Three

## Give Your Guide a “Taste Test!”

Without a guide I can go very few places. Since the onset of my blindness, my guides have included quite a cast! I’ve held onto the arms of strangers in airports and the hand of my 95-year-old grandpa. I’ve had tall, staid men and short, squirmy boys guide me. A few women who’ve walked with me have said very confidently, “We’re going left here,” as they conspicuously turned right. (Sorry, girls, but some among us are directionally challenged!) In college, I had a guide named Karen, and more recently, one named Stephanie. Both these friends are in wheelchairs, so I hold the handles, they push ... and we’re off! My guides walk or roll. I trust my guides.

You know what qualifies someone to guide? Sight! Let’s face it, though. Just because people can see doesn’t mean they’re worthy of my trust. Trust is a choice I make and a risk I take. Why? Because otherwise I’d never go anywhere! The journey is worth the risk.

My family members were my first guides. My brothers were in elementary and middle school at the time, and they learned the basic techniques right away. I loosely gripped the elbow of one and walked next to him. This meant, of course, that we had to touch. How painful for them! How agonizing for me! Cooties may be invisible, but believe me, they exist. We all had to swallow our pride.

My guide was taught to gently pull his arm behind his back when approaching narrow places to signal me to walk behind instead of beside him. It worked well. My brothers learned quickly to count steps, bark commands like “Left!” or “Right!” (they