



How to Take a Step of Faith

"...and lead me in the everlasting way."

– Psalm 139:24b

Okay, so now what?

Let's go back to the beginning of your LifeSigns journey. You've walked in the magnificent footsteps of David, a man after God's own heart, by praying as David prayed from Psalm 139, "Search me, O God..." Your vertical conversation has opened the door for the Spirit to speak freely to the deepest issues in your life. Your horizontal conversation has broken the chains of isolation, offered encouragement, and provided some accountability. It's all good.

While your two LifeSigns conversations are a powerful catalyst for growth, this is only the beginning. Now you may be wondering, "How do I turn all these good intentions into action?" The purpose of this last chapter is to explore some biblical principles for taking a "step of faith," even when you're fearful, doubtful, and have tried before and failed.

Like Maurice Ravel's famous orchestral work, Boléro, the entire chapter of Psalm 139 builds to a crescendo, a climax, a grand invitation to dance. In this Psalm of David, after a lifetime of candid conversations with God—from tears in a dark cave, to shouts of victory atop the throne of Israel—David reveals just how deeply we are known by God. Psalm 139 vividly describes a heavenly Father who actually "understands your thoughts from afar," and "is intimately acquainted with all your ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O Lord, You know it all" (v. 3-4).

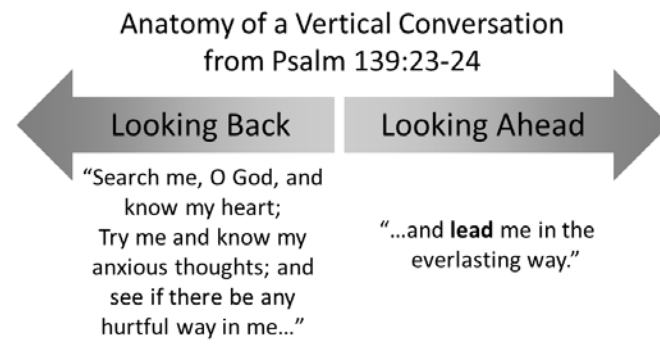
But Psalm 139 describes more than God’s omniscience—it also describes the outrageous depth of God’s affection for you. God is not just collecting data on your life, like some super-computer in the sky, recording your every thought and move. God is in love with you! You capture His full attention. He’s not distant or distracted, but rather, you fill His thoughts day and night. As David writes, “How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand” (v. 17-18). Every time I go to the beach, I marvel at how many grains of sand fit in the palm of my hand. I marvel that God loves me so much.

With God’s tender love, and His full knowledge of the smallest details of your life firmly in mind, let’s look again at the last two verses of Psalm 139, with fresh eyes.

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.” - Psalm 139:23-24*

One of the best ways to apply scripture to your life is to pinpoint the verbs. The verbs always point to the action, and to who is taking the action. So carefully note the first four verbs in this text. You’ve asked God to *search you*, to *try you*, to *know you*, and to *see you*. In this case, God is the one doing the diagnosis. Not you.

Now, let’s zero-in on that last, critical verb in Psalm 139: “And *lead me* in the everlasting way.” The original Hebrew word for lead, *nachah*, literally means to *guide* or to *straighten*. You’re saying, in effect, “God, in light of everything you’ve revealed to me, the depths of my heart, the anxieties of my mind, and the hurtful ways I sometimes live—in light of your awesome love and affection for me—where do I go from here? I’m ready to follow You. Show me the way.” (see below)



As the arrows suggest, with LifeSigns you’re not just looking back (“How are you?”), you’re *looking forward* (“What’s next?”). While there’s tremendous value in your vertical and horizontal conversations, that’s not the ultimate goal. As Jesus said to his first disciples, His voice still beckons you to “follow Me.”

Here's the challenge. Following Jesus is, more often than not, a step into the unknown—it requires a step of faith. Getting a haircut or going to the grocery store doesn't require much faith. However, launching a new career, confronting an abusive co-worker, forgiving a wayward spouse, or sharing Christ with your neighbor—now those steps take faith!

So how do you step out in faith, rather than in the flesh? How do you move from where you are now, into the new life God has for you?

Living in “The Gap”

At the bottom of each section in LifeSigns, we simply asked: “Given all we've discussed, what step of faith, large or small, is God leading you to take when it comes to your _____?” (i.e., marriage, career, relationships, finances, kids, etc.).

For most people who've spent time in church, the idea of “taking a step of faith” is old hat. Please don't dismiss this so quickly, just because you've heard it before. A step of faith may be common sense, but it's not common practice. We all live in the tension of what I call, “The Gap.” It's the awkward distance between our beliefs and our behaviors, between hearing God's voice and our decision to follow.

Yes, the finished work of Christ on the cross provides you a brand new identity. Yes, once you've placed your trust in Him, you're a “new creation,” and you have the freedom to live victoriously (Colossians 2:13-15). But to be honest, too often my actions fall woefully short of my aspirations. Even when the Lord's leading is clear—and I hate to admit this—I'm dreadfully slow to respond. In some cases, I've plugged my ears and dragged my feet for weeks, or months, or years.

You already know that LifeSigns is not about self-evaluation. To be perfectly clear, *it's not about self-improvement either*. Any bookstore, gym, personal trainer, or financial planner can give you a self-improvement program. Those kinds of plans are both good and helpful, but taking a step of faith is radically different. How so? You're not just following ten rules to drop ten pounds—you're following Jesus into the mystery of a deeper relationship with Him. Taking a Spirit-led step of faith is about allowing Christ to live in you and through you, and allowing Him to lead you into new places you'd never go on your own.

So let's put the real issue squarely on the table. When you look at your LifeSigns profile, do you ever wonder, “*How's it going to be different this time? Can I really change? Should I take this risk, or that step of faith?*” If you've ever tried to follow God's leading and fallen short, if you've ever felt that real change is impossible, then you're not alone. Even the apostle Paul wrestled with The Gap when he said, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out” (Romans 7:18). A few verses later, Paul

also describes the solution: “Do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4).

Here’s the point: All those maddening gaps in your life—in your marriage, your finances, your career, your ministry—they all represent God-given opportunities to experience new life in Christ. But at the same time, deep, lasting change can be difficult and discouraging. We make resolutions—and we break them. We change for a season—and slip back into old habits. You may sometimes feel it’s just not worth the effort, it’s too painful, or that God has surely run out of patience. Relax. Your life and your growth are in His gentle hands.

So, whether you’re motivated by aspirations (big dreams) or by desperation (big fears), let’s see what the Bible says about closing the gap, and discovering God’s grace along the way.

Step of Faith: Your Part, God’s Part

Here’s some good news: Paul proclaimed, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). The work that God began in you, He will also complete. You are His workmanship. Your personal growth is about His power, not yours. So first and foremost, remember that God is both the *author* and the *perfecter* of your faith (Hebrews 12:1-2).

A step of faith has two key components: faith + action. You’re trusting God for direction, for His power, and for the ultimate outcome. Said differently, God is the master gardener, He’s causing the growth, and He is producing the fruit (John 15). That’s why a “step of faith” is fundamentally different from any worldly self-improvement program. Anything God brings into your life that causes you to pause, to consider the risks, and to squint into the swirling mists of uncertainty—requires a response in faith. And it’s supposed to work that way. Because, “without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Hebrews 11:6).

Second, taking a “step of faith” means you’re actually going to get up and move! It’s more than setting a new direction or adopting some new priorities—there’s effort, exertion, and in some cases, copious amounts of perspiration involved. This is not a passive faith. It’s an active, vigorous faith.

James strikes the balance between faith and action by asking: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds?...Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2). The primary motive for taking action is captured by Paul when he writes, “Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Timothy 4:10).

Aspiration or Desperation: What Drives You?

A step of faith is initiated by, dependent on, and enabled by the Holy Spirit. I've found that God uses two different kinds of situations to get my attention and move me to action: aspiration and desperation.

When God puts a dream in your heart, a vision for the future, or a burden for those missing the grace of God—that is aspiration. When the Spirit grabs your heart and you discover a passion to make a difference in the lives of others, that is aspiration. Big goals and bold dreams usually come with big risks—they require faith. God-given aspirations, whether for your family, your career, your marriage, or your ministry can be powerful motivators.

Pain can also be a powerful motivator. A couple of years before I met my “adopted brother” Billy, he was at the end of his rope (literally). With his permission, I'll share part of a letter Billy sent me after reading the first edition of the LifeSigns book.

When I took that “step of faith” to join Mercy Ships, it wasn't so much an act of obedience as it was desperation. Here I was cooking for one of the richest men in the world, known all over Austin and much of Texas for my charity work, and I was not far from death's door. I was an alcoholic and a drug addict. Not like I was breaking into people's houses to get money for crack, but I would take anything anyone put in front of me. I reached a realization that my time was running out. I had a “conversation” with God and told Him if something didn't drastically change I would be dead in six months. My only prayer at that point was that I wouldn't take anyone else with me when it happened (i.e., drinking and driving). I was almost beaten to death by my “best friend” and that's when I cried out to God.

For Billy, pain and desperation drove him into the arms of God, and into a readiness to respond. Listen, God knows exactly what it takes to shake you awake and to move you into action. Whether it's aspiration or desperation, the idea is to learn how to listen carefully for God's voice and train yourself to respond faithfully.

Getting Practical: Closing “The Gap”

I'll never forget my first marathon back in 1996. In just six months, I went from being a couch potato, unable to run more than a couple of miles, to crossing the finish line of the Dallas White Rock Marathon.

The big deal isn't that I stumbled through 26.2 miles to the finish line—thousands of people do that every year without the power of the Spirit. More significant was the discovery of three key biblical principles for taking a step of faith (see below).

Step of Faith: Bridging the GAP



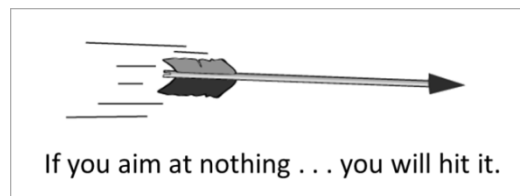
These three principles: Goals, Allies, and Plans (GAP), have changed how I approach taking any significant step of faith. If you and I met at Starbucks and you shared a specific step of faith from your LifeSigns, I'd ask you three GAP questions:

- What does your final destination look like? (Goals)
- Who's with you? (Allies)
- How will you get there? (Plans)

Your answers to those three questions (or lack thereof), would reveal how likely you are to be successful. All three are critical, so let's spend a minute on each.

#1 - Goals: Where are you going?

My freshman year in college, a roommate's parents put a sign over his desk. With an arrow flying randomly through the air, it simply stated:



Even today, that sign makes me giggle. I suspect that my roommate's parents were trying to send a not-so-subtle message: "Don't just float through college. Find your passion, pick a major, and focus!"

Paul said essentially the same thing to an undisciplined bunch of believers in the Corinthian church: "Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26). Like my roommate's parents, Paul was telling his spiritual children down in Corinth, "Don't run aimlessly. Don't just swing wildly. Focus!"

If you look closely at the gospels, you'll find that Jesus had very clear goals to guide his steps throughout His earthly ministry. He knew *why* He was here and *what* the Father wanted him to accomplish. And even though the disciples sometimes misunderstood His mission and motives, Jesus was crystal clear on His ultimate destination, and how He would get there.

Some of Jesus' goals encompassed the larger purpose of His life's work: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). The disciples were hoping the Messiah would free them from iron-fisted Roman rule.

Some of Jesus' goals provided guidelines for *how* He would operate in ministry: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). You may remember the disciples were focused on who would be the greatest.

Sometimes Jesus used a contrast to more accurately describe his mission: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). People flocked to Jesus when He met their physical needs, but Jesus came to meet their spiritual needs as well.

Some of Jesus' goals were situation-specific and unpopular with the crowd. After healing dozens of people in Capernaum, Luke writes, "They tried to keep him from leaving them. But He said to them, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose'" (Luke 4:42).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus clearly understood *who* was calling the shots, even in the most difficult circumstances. The night before being tortured and humiliated on the cross, He said, "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour?' *But for this purpose I came to this hour*" (John 12:27), and later He said, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36).

Don't miss that last example. Jesus surrendered His will in exchange for the Father's will for his life, even when it meant death on a cross. For Jesus, the essence of walking by faith meant submitting to His Father's goals, plans, and methods to redeem a lost world.

Where is God leading you?

Look again at each area in your LifeSigns: Relationships. Marriage. Money. Career. Kids. Finances.

If you haven't already done so, grab some paper, pray, and ask the Lord this question: "*God, I'm willing to follow wherever you lead me. What's the next step in this area of my life?*" Writing down your next steps can help solidify your goals and turn all those squishy wishes into firm commitments.

I don't know about you, but when I'm trying to discern God's will, I tend to over-think and over-complicate things. I tend to "lean on my own understanding" rather than trusting in God. Listen to how Jesus provides such simple, clear instructions to his disciples:

*"Come to Me."*¹

"Listen to Me."

"Follow Me."

"Abide in Me."

Notice that each of these commands has two critical components: His invitation and our response. Do you have wounds and burdens from your past? Jesus invites you to, "Come to Me." Don't know how to resolve a conflict that's poisoning a relationship? He says, "Listen to Me." Wrestling with a major career decision? He says, "Follow Me." The flame in your marriage growing dim? Jesus says, "Abide in Me." Simple, clear, and practical.

Lastly, I often return to the familiar verse in Proverbs when praying for God's direction: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 2:3-4). It's the perfect prescription for a step of faith.

I know there's much more we could explore when it comes to understanding the Spirit's leadership in your life. If you'd like to learn more about how to hear and follow God's leading, pick up a copy of the excellent book, *The Power of a Whisper*, by Bill Hybels. It's packed with practical, biblical wisdom.

#2 - Allies: Who's with you?

Our merry band of marathon wannabes met every Saturday morning for our long runs, pushing ourselves farther into the unknown week after week. Honestly, there's just no way I'd have tackled all those long runs by myself. We shared our stories, our struggles, and our little victories. We laughed till Gatorade came out our noses and we clung to each other for courage in the final miles. It was an unforgettable lesson in the power of Allies.

Wedge into that familiar scripture from Ecclesiastes, the one you hear at weddings about how, "Two are better than one," therein lies a stern warning: "Woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:10b). Proverbs goes even further to warn us about the perils of isolation, "He who separates himself seeks his own desire, he quarrels against all sound wisdom" (Proverbs 18:1). If nothing else comes from your LifeSigns experience, I'm praying that you'll connect with someone who can "lift you up" when you fall.

¹ For context, see Matthew 11:28, Mark 7:14, John 1:43, John 15:4

Jesus had powerful Allies during his earthly trek. First and foremost, He had the Father and the Spirit. Skim the book of John and you'll often find Jesus saying things like, "I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak" (John 14:29). You'll also see the Spirit ministering to Him in the desert, and later, in the garden of Gethsemane.

My kids love the Charlie Brown cartoon where Linus asks, "*Did Jesus have a dog?*" While I have no idea if Jesus had canine companionship (my kids are sure that He did). I do know that Jesus invested years in developing human companions.

Think about it. The twelve disciples were hand-picked, intentionally developed, and carefully nurtured Allies. Peter, James, and John formed His inner circle. Look closely at the gospel of Luke and you might even catch a glimpse of His ministry support team: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna. These faithful women "were helping to support them out of their own means...as Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1, 3).

You have powerful Allies too: the Father, the Son, the Spirit. Notice how all three are woven together into a powerful alliance of support:

"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:16-17).

That's right, Jesus called the Holy Spirit by the name of "Helper." Isn't that cool? The Bible includes more than 100 different names for God. All those names can help you understand His many attributes, character, and nature. Next time you're struggling to take a step of faith, try approaching God in a fresh way. Engage Him as your Helper. Counselor. Comforter. Advocate. Shepherd. Deliverer. Friend. Mediator. Refuge. Rock. Daddy (Abba). Teacher. Strength.

What's more, even if you're not the outgoing type, you can develop powerful friendships. But just as the twelve disciples didn't corner Jesus in the temple and ask to be his friend, so too you need to prayerfully consider potential Allies, then initiate relationships with those God puts around you.

It's okay to pick Allies with an eye towards your God-given goals. When I needed help to start a company, I reached out to David Dobat, Kurt Baxter, and my parents, Dick and Cindy Watson, to help craft a business plan. All of them had traveled the perilous road of entrepreneurship, dodged the potholes, and learned valuable lessons from the terrain along the way.

#3: Plans – How will you get there?

Running a marathon is less about race-day inspiration than it is about systematic preparation. When our little group started training, my longest run was four miles, max. So I couldn't begin to imagine running two dozen miles at one time. If I thought about race day for very long, panic would set in. But we had a proven plan. Over the span of 16 weeks, we gradually increased the length of our long runs by just one mile, or 10% each week. Soon, double-digit training runs were no big deal. What was utterly impossible a few months before, became possible as we followed the training plan. As race day loomed closer on the calendar, I took tremendous comfort in knowing we'd followed a well-researched, proven plan of preparation.

God is one heck of a strategic planner. The concept of strategic planning may be popular in the business world, but even the most sophisticated long-range planners in multi-billion dollar companies have nothing on the sophisticated planning done by God. According to one expert, Jesus fulfilled more than 315 Old Testament prophecies as the Messiah, including His birth, life, death, and resurrection. Don't let the word "prophecy" throw you, it simply refers to those bits and pieces of God's strategic plan that He chose to reveal to biblical authors across the centuries. Those prophecies were "sneak peeks" of His elaborately crafted script of redemption, brilliantly written by the hand of the Master.

Jesus had a plan for his earthly ministry: Over and over, He told the disciples, "I'm here to do the Father's will." The Father's agenda was His agenda. The Father's priorities were His priorities. And the Father's plan was His plan.

Jesus said, "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as *the Father taught Me*" (John 8:28). Jesus also said, "But so that the world may know that I love the Father, *I do exactly as the Father commanded Me*" (John 14:31).

And we learn in Matthew that, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matthew 16:21).

Bottom Line: Jesus had a detailed and terrifying plan. Sometimes, it's hard to believe He actually followed through, knowing exactly what was to come. Oh how He must love us! Which leads us back to you. God tells us that He has plans for your life, "to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

What's more, we know from the creation account that we share in God's nature and personality. God is a planner, and as those created in His image, we are planners too. Your methods and means of planning may differ from mine, but the act of looking into the future, prayerfully asking God to guide your steps, and using your God-given intellect to chart a course...it's all from Him. There's nothing unspiritual about it!

Rather than suggest a template or method for planning, let's look to scripture for some guiding principles. Here's a few of the more helpful and practical verses on planning:

- "The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage" (Proverbs 21:5). Notice, we gain an advantage when we're diligent in planning.
- "The mind of man plans his way, But the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). Notice the blend of our human plans and God's sovereign direction. Both are at work.
- Jesus spoke of the wisdom of planning with this parable: "For which one of you, when he wants to build a tower, does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who observe it begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand men to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace" (Luke 14:28-32).

Next Steps: How can you obey today?

Goals. Allies. Plans. Three powerful, biblical principles that can help turn aspirations into actions. They will serve you well in following Jesus, wherever He's leading you. Now, do you want to hear the rest of Billy's story? It's wonderful:

When I cried out to God, Mercy Ships came into my mind as clear as can be. When Mercy Ships came into my mind I questioned why. In my heart God spoke to me and said, "I am about to put you on a path that will reveal a side of you that you have never known before." That was enough for me. I called Julie as she was getting ready to leave for Africa. That I caught her at home was practically an act of God in itself. We talked about 5 minutes, she gave me some basic info and I went home and wrote out my resignation. I didn't really know what Mercy Ships was, I didn't know where it was, and I didn't know what the Crossroads school was. I just knew I was supposed to go. That wasn't as much of a step of faith as I knew if things didn't change, I was a dead man. So I resigned in March not knowing I wouldn't leave until September. But I went because I knew that I knew that I knew what God had said.

Did you catch that? Billy says, "I knew...that I knew...that I knew what God had said." And Billy did follow through, completing a demanding six-month missions training program. He later became the executive chef in Mercy Ships' global training center. Over the last dozen years, Billy has continued to take steps of faith. I've seen God transform his heart, use his gifts to touch thousands of people, develop his skills as a master chef and writer, and integrate him into the fabric of our family. It all

started with a five minute phone call, prompted by God’s grace, enabled by God’s power, and wrapped in God’s plan for Billy’s life.

You may be struggling with the “Next Steps” section of your LifeSigns. Most folks do. I hear things like, “I just don’t know God’s will for my life,” or, “I’m praying for clarity before I do anything.” Fair enough, those are good prayers. But whether your next steps are clear or not, may I make a simple suggestion?

Do whatever is next. Obey today.

In my experience, a Spirit-led step of faith usually only requires a “baby step,” rather than a flying leap into the abyss of the unknown. *Baby steps can be big steps.*

Over the years, I’ve taken a baby step by walking over to the sink and pouring out a nearly full bottle of alcohol. By faith, more times than I’ll readily admit, I’ve picked up the phone and told someone, “I was wrong. I’m sorry. Can we talk?” By faith, as I struggled to develop the very first version of LifeSigns, I asked some very busy men and women to give me their time, feedback, and wise counsel. And by faith, I still choose to get into my car and drive to Celebrate Recovery meetings, choosing to be candid and honest with a circle of men who are doing the same. Those little steps often lead to big victories.

For me, this whole “step of faith” business follows a predictable cycle: the tension builds, I resist, I suffer the consequences of inaction, and finally, I move. There’s usually an immediate sense of joy, blessing, and relief. That’s why at the end of James’ explanation of faith and action, he writes, “Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do.” Notice that James says, in effect, the blessing follows the doing.

Here’s a sure sign of spiritual growth in your life: Are you resisting less—and responding more to the Spirit’s nudge? That’s it. That’s the whole ball game, my friend.

Nudge, respond. Nudge, respond.

If the Lord has not revealed the entire path for your future, just what’s next, He does that on purpose. Jesus wants you to learn to trust Him. So just take that next step in faith.

Nudge, respond. Nudge, respond.

And by all means, have goals, allies, and plans. Doing so will increase your odds of success exponentially. When we get to our heavenly home, I’m going to ask the Lord to pull back the curtain

and reveal how, “The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand.” (Psalm 37:23-24).

I can almost see Him holding my hand.

In the meantime, my shaky steps will be by faith.

Questions? Comments? Please contact Scott Watson at scott@myLifeSigns.org,
or by calling the church office at 972-306-4477.