

What's going on here?

Welcome back to Walking with Purpose! If you're counting, you'll know this is week six. And if your group has been with us on previous studies, you'll know that next week is something special. Next week's meeting will be what we call a celebration. It'll be a chance for your group to get together and have some fun. You might plan a special meal or a picnic. You might want to have a special time with all your families, or maybe a special time of prayer. Maybe one person can share his or her life story—including dreams for the future. We're going to do this every seven weeks! We'll keep working at it until we get good at it (*smile*). It gives us a chance to celebrate the fact that we have a wonderful God who has a wonderful plan for our lives, and wants to bless us with incredible joy.

Now back to our lesson. I remember hearing about author Marshall Shelley, who suffered the deaths of two of his children. He said that even as a child, he loved to read. Yet he quickly learned that he would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel. New characters were introduced, seemingly random events took place, and complicated subplots didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot. But he learned to keep reading. Why? Because he knew that the author, if he or she is any good, would weave them all together by the end of the book. Eventually, each element would be meaningful. What a great analogy to life! At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice. When we can't explain *why* a birth defect allows a child to live on earth only two minutes; why the parents we have patiently prayed years for have just died without Christ; or why famine and floods are allowed to ravage the earth. Shelley said that it's at time like these, he chooses to trust that before the book closes, the Author will make things clear!



Fellowship

1. Share a time in your life when confusing circumstances resulted in a crisis of faith.



Discipleship

I've got great news for you today! Your life was not an accident! You were planned by God since the foundations of the earth! Now, your *parents* may not have planned you, but God sure did! Not only that, but the events of your life are not accidental either!

The dictionary defines an "accident" as "an unforeseen event or one without apparent cause." Any Christian who understands the sovereignty of God will immediately determine from this definition that *there is no such thing as an accident*. Everything is foreseen by Him!

It's like the cowboy who goes to buy some life insurance. The broker asked him if he had had any accidents in the past year, to which the cowboy replied "No. But I was kicked by a horse, chased by a raging bull and bitten by a snake - that sure laid me up for a while." The agent said, "Weren't they accidents?" To which the stockman replied, "No, they did it on purpose." (*chuckle*) There are no such things as accidents. What makes this truth so exciting is that God will use anyone, no matter their ability or lack of it! In our last teaching session we talked about how to gain freedom from our past and all negative thinking. This may be more work for some than for others! But once we claim our freedom to walk in the purpose for which God created us, He will use us...with however little or much He's given us. And remember, the results we see aren't important! It's all about Him and bringing glory to *His* name! He can and will write the chapters of our life as He sees fit! And just like in literature, it may include tragedy, conflict, mystery, and confusing plots with no seeming resolution. But hang in there...He's written every page!

Michael's mother filled his childhood evenings with stories of flying. They described the land from a bird's eye view, her excitement and passion for details making his dreams full of color and beauty. His idea of flying was to run, and he so vividly dreamed it that he could almost feel the rocks and chunks of dirt at his feet. As he grew, his passion for being airborne grew into a love and affinity for pole vaulting. His hopes were pinned on the national Junior Olympics, and one day he found himself awaiting his turn at the meet...palms sweating and heart racing. The stands were filled with 20,000 people, even though the final race had ended an hour earlier. The pole vault is truly the glamour event of any track-and-field competition. The pole vault for Michael merged the two personalities of his parents: the freedom and free spirit of his mother with the hard core realist of his father, who believed in hard work and sweat. His motto was, "If you want something, work for it!" From the age of 14, Michael did just that. He began a carefully regimented weight-lifting program and worked out every day. Weights one day and running the next. His dedication, determination and discipline were a coach's dream. Besides being an honor student and only child, Michael faithfully helped his parents with farm chores. Perfection in all he did was his passion. All of Michael's months and years

of preparation led to this day. His first vault of the meet at 17 feet broke his previous record and was a new personal best. When he *again* cleared the bar at 17 feet 2 inches, then again at 17/4...he still showed no emotion. His work was not completed. Right before his final jump, he did a series of push ups and prepared for the event of his lifetime. The runway felt different this time, and for a moment gave him a sense of confusion. Suddenly the truth hit him square in the face: The bar was set at 9 inches higher than his personal best. That was only one inch away from the national record! He began shaking from the intensity of the moment. What was he going to do? He had never experienced these feelings of nervousness! Then, out of nowhere, and from the deepest depths of his soul, he envisioned his mother. As he began sprinting down the runway, something felt wonderfully familiar. The surface below him felt like that country road he used to dream about. Suddenly, it happened. He began to fly. His takeoff was effortless...and better yet, this was no dream; it was real. It was either the eruption of the people in the stands or the thump of his landing that brought Michael back to earth. Michael set National and International Junior Olympic records and his life would never be the same. But you see, it wasn't just because he had improved on his personal best, but also because *Michael Stone is blind.*

Turn with me now to Psalm 139 as we read it together.

“O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord. You hem me in – behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you. If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

This just may be my favorite passage in all of Scripture! Whenever I feel alone or confused with how the story of my life is being written, I turn to Psalm 139! God knows

every last detail of our lives: our physical limitations and health challenges; our temptations and weaknesses; our past, present and every day of our future; our sorrows that no one else sees and the things that bring a smile to our faces. He's got the answer to every question and the plot mapped out for the rest of eternity. Even if I wanted to, I could never escape His watchful care! Verse 12 shows that even every rape or mugging in the darkness happened in the daylight and brilliance of His presence, even though He wasn't physically visible! Every time we cry an anguished, "Why?"...God knows the "because." But oh, brothers and sisters, it's so hard to wait until the end of the book, isn't it? Even knowing how it will end still leaves us groaning in the present. We cry with David in verse 19 for the end of evil and evildoers.

But let's think back to our pole-vaulting friend, Michael Stone. Do you think that God received *more* glory because of his handicap? *I* think so. But it really isn't about what *I* think; it's not *my* story, and I'm not the Author. But what I do know is this: the circumstances of your life are never wasted! It requires faith and perseverance to continue reading when you don't understand. But your Author can be trusted completely, and the story of *your* life will be a masterpiece!

2. Read I Corinthians 15:54 and II Corinthians 5:2-5. How are your life circumstances causing you to long for heaven?
3. Read Hebrews chapter 11. How is faith defined according to verse 1?
4. Who do you most admire in this "Hall of Faith" (Hebrews 11)?
5. What do we have in common with those in Hebrews 11? (verses 39, 40) How would your personal hero react with *your* toughest challenge?
6. What events have you seen as handicaps that later you realized were blessings?
7. How can you personally obey Mark 11:22 this week?
8. Why is obedience to Ephesians 6:16 so crucial?



Ministry

9. How are you a living example of II Corinthians 5:7 right now? Encourage each other as you share their struggles.
10. If you're willing, share some areas of doubt/confusion that you might each be facing, and we'll pray for them before we leave.

11. Be sure to take a minute and plan your celebration for next week.



Evangelism

12. Talk about your group service project and finalize any plans in order to complete it this week.



Worship

13. Read Psalm 139 again, and take turns sharing which verse is most significant to you. Then close in prayer remembering the challenges shared earlier.