



Blind FAITH

Bill Irwin's unique
hike to find God

*By John W. Kennedy
Photography by Debra Irwin*

Bill Irwin had never been backpacking or hiking in his life. He knew nothing about the Appalachian Trail. Physical fitness really hadn't been a priority for him. And as a 50-year-old blind man, he didn't have a desire to go walking along a rugged path just for the thrill of it.

Yet, eight people who had never met Irwin — and didn't know each other — independently phoned or wrote to him. Each told him they felt impressed to challenge him to try to hike the trail. None of these people had any Christian beliefs, but as a relatively new Christian, Irwin sensed that God had prompted these strangers to make the same pitch for a purpose.

So, after he jettisoned various excuses for not hiking, Irwin agreed to give it a shot. He figured he could make it two or three miles and satisfy his encouragers.

But Irwin didn't quit after a few miles. He didn't even give up after a few days. Despite the tremendous difficulties he encountered, Irwin spent eight months walking the entire 2,168-mile trail.

By the end, Irwin understood why God wanted him to make that journey in 1990. In becoming the first, and to this day, only blind

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person to hike the Appalachian Trail, Irwin generated massive publicity that year and granted interview after interview — on the condition that each writer mention God as Irwin’s motivation for hiking.

Family and friends accompanied Irwin at the beginning and near the end of his adventure. But for about 85 percent of the journey, Irwin walked with no other companion besides his German shepherd guide dog, Orient.

The blindness added weeks

During the walk, every morning before he began Irwin would listen to an audiocassette tape from his son Billy describing landmarks he would encounter that day.

Irwin lived in Burlington, N.C., at the time and members of his Sunday School class mailed him food supplies along the way. Various sporting goods and hiking equipment companies outfitted him for the trek.

A challenge for Irwin — or for anyone who attempts the trail — is coping with the rugged ter-

Usually, the 1,000 or so hikers who attempt the journey along the world’s longest continuously marked footpath leave later in the year. But Irwin correctly figured he would take longer than the average hiker.

Occasionally his delay resulted from his wandering off the path. Plus, Orient had to spend several days resting because of injured feet.

During spring and fall, Irwin endured an inordinate amount of rainfall. During the summer he battled hot drought conditions.

Bill Irwin hikes the Appalachian Trail in 1990 with his guide dog, Orient.



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When floodwaters washed out a bridge, Irwin ended up being carried under by the current and nearly drowned. He also broke a rib and became hypothermic. Yet he kept going, because he believed God would be glorified.

to the expedition — a trek only completed by about 200 sighted people annually.

Irwin lost sight in his left eye in 1968. Doctors misdiagnosed the condition as malignant melanoma and operated. A decade later, Irwin’s right eye had deteriorated to the point where he had no sight at all. Irwin has chorioretinitis, which leaves him unable to distinguish any images. He can only recognize flickering light.

rain. He had to climb cliffs, cross bridges and ford streams. The first 200 miles are uphill. And then he had to deal with adverse weather conditions.

As he embarked on March 8 from Springer Mountain in Georgia, Irwin still had to contend with remnants of Hurricane Hugo from the year before. Along the first 100 miles, Irwin kept encountering downed trees and other debris that hadn’t been cleared.

Every day in October along the path precipitation pummeled Irwin. For the final 300 miles he struggled to keep his footing on ice and snow.

When floodwaters washed out a bridge, Irwin ended up being carried under by the current and nearly drowned. He also broke a rib and became hypothermic.

On average, he fell about 25 times each day.

Yet he kept going, because he believed God would be glori-

fied. On Nov. 21, after walking through 14 states, Irwin completed his journey at Mount Katahdin in Maine.

“Everyone needs to know about the Lord,” Irwin says. “There is a lot of apathy in the world. People need to hear how God can enable them to do something unusual.”

By the end of the expedition, the out-of-shape Irwin certainly had become fit. Since then, he has walked an additional 5,000 miles.

Today, based in Sebec, Maine, the 67-year-old Irwin uses his Appalachian Trail experiences to encourage others. He heads a consulting company in which he is a motivational speaker, professional writer, and marriage and family counselor. Half of his counseling clients are pastors or church leaders.

“My faith sustained me on

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the Appalachian Trail," Irwin says. "Faith is an integral part of everything I do. I don't make a speech without giving God credit for everything good that's happened in my life."

However, beyond his overcoming obstacles as a blind hiker, audiences relate to Irwin personally because of all his adversities, including four failed marriages — three of which lasted two years or less. And he waged a 26-year battle with alcoholism while working as a clinical chemist corporate manager.

"Alcohol about destroyed my life and everyone else around me," Irwin says.

His three children from his first 12-year marriage all wound up in addictions. Irwin entered treatment initially to convince his youngest son to surrender his cocaine addiction. When a Christian mentored Irwin during his recovery program in 1988, God delivered him from a desire to drink. Once he committed his life to Christ, Irwin made peace



Age hasn't slowed down the Maine hiker, who keeps fit at 67.

with his ex-wives and children.

Since 1996, Irwin has been married to his wife, Debra, whom he met while speaking at a singles retreat for Christians.

Often those attending a marriage retreat to hear Irwin speak come feeling sorry for themselves and angry with their spouse. Yet by the end of the weekend they are grateful to God for how He has blessed them. They leave prepared to face life's obstacles with a renewed vigor.

With sophisticated computer technology available to the visually impaired, Irwin is able to read three or four books per week to keep current with topics on which he speaks. He composes all his own material in preparation for giving a speech or leading a seminar.

God has given Irwin a tremendous ability to remember what he has written, and then to deliver it in a homespun manner with self-deprecating humor. When speaking, he does it all from memory, without notes. Debra handles the travel arrangements.

The couple is always up for a new challenge. Last year, they adopted an 11-year-old girl, Amanda.

Irwin has told his life story in *Blind Courage*, now in its 13th printing. In addition, a children's book, *Orient*, teaches how guide dogs are trained and how God can help them.

The Irwins attend Living Word Assembly of God in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine. Pastor Tom Bruce says when

Bill Irwin continues to climb rough terrain with the help of Colby.



Irwin shared his Appalachian Trail experience from the pulpit it inspired him. For the past three years, Bruce has taken a week annually to hike a portion of the trail with his two sons, Dylan, 12, and Corbyn, 10.

In their spare time during the past eight years, Bill and Debra have been constructing a log cabin, alone, by hand. It is nearing completion. Bruce says it's amazing to see Bill driving a forklift with massive logs, being directed by Debra on the phone. Irwin also helped the Bruce family move into their parsonage.

"Sometimes you have to stop and think, *He really is blind isn't he?*" Bruce asks. "But Bill doesn't allow his disability to stop him. He understands the power of God." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

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