



*Author Bonnie St. John makes a point to schedule daily moments that bring her joy, such as basking in sunshine or recollecting happy memories.*

WHETHER FALLING DOWN OR GETTING UP—IN LIFE, AT AN OLYMPIC SKI RACE, OR IN BUSINESS— BONNIE ST. JOHN HAS CHOSEN TO LIVE JOYFULLY AND STRIVES TO HELP OTHERS DO THE SAME.

# CHOOSE JOY

**BONNIE ST. JOHN KNOWS** a lot about overcoming obstacles. As a young girl, she lost her leg to amputation and her innocence to an abusive stepfather. Some might say she had to scale a mountain of anguish, but she literally came barreling down the other side—Bonnie, today an accomplished speaker and author, won several medals for ski racing in the 1984 Paralympics.

In her newest book, *Live Your Joy* (Faith Words, 2009), Bonnie shares her own “joy journey” and offers practical tips and advice to encourage readers to seek out the joy in every day, even the difficult ones. As Bonnie so aptly puts it, “Everyone has the God-given capacity to live joyfully—it doesn’t depend on your circumstances. But it does require that you make the choice to identify your joys in life and take action to reach them.”

### FACING CHALLENGES, FINDING DREAMS

Following her dreams with joy hasn't always come easily to Bonnie. Abandoned by her father before she was born, she grew up in San Diego, where her mom supported Bonnie and her two siblings on a modest teacher's salary. While her mother worked, Bonnie's stepfather sexually abused her. Though the abuse stopped when she was 7, the emotional scars followed her into adulthood.

Bonnie faced physical challenges, too. Born with a condition that stunted the growth in her right leg, Bonnie had it amputated below the knee at age 5. She was fitted with a wooden prosthetic that she's likened to Pinocchio's limbs. However, with her mother's encouragement, Bonnie refused to dwell on her disability.

One day when Bonnie was 10, her mother presented her with a picture of a one-legged skier, which was captioned "If I can do this, I can do anything." The silhouette, so like her own, and the possibilities contained in those nine simple words set her spirit soaring. It didn't matter that she was a one-legged African-American girl from a low-income single-parent home, or that she lived in a city where snow was seen only on TV—she could do anything!

Bonnie went on to pursue that dream, and less than a decade later, she made history in Innsbruck, Austria, as the first African-American ever to win medals in the Winter Paralympics competition as a ski racer, taking home a silver and two bronze medals.

*Prosthetics have come a long way since Bonnie was fitted with a wooden leg at age 5. Today, Bonnie has two prosthetic legs—a cosmetically covered one, which her daughter, Darcy, calls her "Barbie" leg and a "sports" leg (shown here), in which all the mechanics are on view.*



*At the 1984 Paralympic Games in Innsbruck, Austria, Bonnie was the second-fastest woman in the world on one leg. Her accomplishments were later celebrated with a quote printed on millions of Starbucks cups.*

### RELYING ON CHRIST

Off the slopes, Bonnie also excelled as a scholar and a businesswoman. She graduated magna cum laude from Harvard University, won a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford University, and, during the Clinton administration, worked as a director for the National Economic Council. She has been hailed by *NBC Nightly News* as "one of the five most inspiring women in America" and declared by former President George W. Bush to be "the kind of person who shows that individual courage matters in life." The source of her courage and the key to her success, she says, is her faith in Christ.

She likens her faith journey to her experience learning to ski. When she first began skiing, she had to learn how to use a piece of equipment known as an "outrigger"—a sort of combination ski pole and crutch that gives an amputee much-needed stability.

When she was a young, unstable Christian, Bonnie's favorite prayer was, "Fix my life, God!" As she matured, however, she realized it wasn't enough to try to live life on her own, calling out to God only when she needed Him to come to her rescue. She found that flying solo had its limits and that she did much bet-

ter when she depended on God to be her balance—her outrigger—all the time.

Currently, Bonnie is CEO of Courageous Spirit, Inc. In addition to providing motivational keynote speeches to business organizations and groups around the country, Bonnie hosts a web-based TV and radio program. "Everything I do," she explains, "is about inspiring people to reach their potential and reach God."

Bonnie is as comfortable talking with runaway teens or homeless people as she is rubbing shoulders with TV personalities and White House officials. Because she has struggled in so many areas of her life, she can relate to those who are currently in the midst of their own struggles. And because she has grown spiritually and overcome many of those struggles, she can offer personal examples and encouragement to help others do the same.

### PENCIL IT IN

*Bonnie points out that we often get so bogged down in the busyness of daily life that we forget to make time for those things that replenish our wellspring of joy. "A big part of actually choosing joy is making time in your day to feel it," she says.*

*Toward that end, Bonnie decided to add a little something extra to her daily schedule, writing in "to feel" items on her "to do" list. Here's an example:*

### TO DO

**10:00am**  
*feel sunshine on my face*

**1:00pm**  
*praise God for five minutes*

**3:00pm**  
*think about how much one person loves me*

**5:30pm**  
*vividly remember my last vacation*

*Though they take only minutes to accomplish, simple actions like these can add a new dimension to your day. "By injecting moments of pure joy throughout my day, I raise my energy level, boost my immune system, and become a better example of my faith in Christ by exuding love and joy in a crazy world," says Bonnie. "Problems force you to make time for them. Joy has to be a choice."*

*For more ideas like these, visit [www.bonniestjohn.com/lyjdevotional.pdf](http://www.bonniestjohn.com/lyjdevotional.pdf) for the free Live Your Joy devotional guide.*

“Because I have had so many tragedies in my life—being in and out of hospitals while I was growing up, being abused by my stepfather for years, and much more—I have the authority to say to people that, no matter how bad your suffering may seem, you truly can choose joy.”

#### GETTING UP FASTER

A bestselling author, Bonnie has five books to her credit, including *How Strong Women Pray*, in which she shares stories of the leadership and courage of women, from Maya Angelou and Barbara Bush to a woman who saved more than 100 disabled people from Hurricane Katrina. Whether writing, speaking, skiing, or being a mom or a friend, Bonnie’s motto remains the same: “Winners get up faster!”

She coined the phrase after her Olympic experience. During the slalom race, Bonnie, along with every other woman coming down the mountain that day, hit a patch of ice and fell. She got up and finished the race, coming in third. Prior to her fall, she had been in the lead. Her conclusion? The two women who beat her didn’t ski faster than she did—they simply got up faster.

“We all fall,” Bonnie says, “whether physically or spiritually. And we all need to allow God to lift us back up and get us going again. But the gold medal winners are the ones who get up the fastest.”

Bonnie knows that when you’re knocked down by tough times, including financial, physical, or other difficulties, getting up can seem daunting. At these times, it’s more important than ever to seek joy, she says. “Whether the suffering is large or small, many think that they will feel joy only when their circumstances are turned around. Actually, it’s the other way around. Making time and choosing God’s joy when your circumstances are at their worst gives

you the energy to face the difficulties and turn it around.”

Though Bonnie’s varied adversities have taught her there is no “magic bullet” that solves everyone’s problems, she has discovered that the secret to her personal growth and success is her ability to seek out a path that nourishes her spirit. She stays physically active, has a strong network of supportive friends, spends time enjoying the outdoors, listens to wise counsel, reads voraciously, and, above all, prays for God’s guidance. “The secret is to allow God to continually clear out those old cobwebs and make room for more joy in your life,” Bonnie advises—words she not only speaks but also practices.

*Family has always been important to Bonnie, shown at age 18 with her brother, Wayne (below) and at age 10, with her sister, April (below left).*

