

 BONNIE ST. JOHN

Live
Your JOY

"Be joyful always"
I Thessalonians 5:16 (NIV)

By
Ana Mollinedo Mims
Bonnie St. John

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Devotional Introduction

One day a pastor was out weeding his garden when a member of his congregation walked by. He admired the pastor's vegetable garden full of tomatoes and neat rows of carrots.

"God has given you a bountiful garden," he said.

"Yes indeed," agreed the pastor, "God provides the sun, the rain, the seeds and plants...but I also have to dig, plant, prune, and pull the weeds. God has so many gifts he wishes to share with us, but we must work in partnership with Him to receive these gifts."

Joy is no exception. We have to roll up our sleeves and work with God to nurture and grow it. Joy is not just something that happens or doesn't happen. We have to till our own soil to reap a crop of joy.

Joy is something we choose—or reject—with our attitudes, beliefs and actions. Tapping into the joy that God has for us does not come naturally to most of us. The book, *Live Your Joy*, focuses on how Bonnie made more room for joy by pruning back unproductive behaviors and weeding out thoughts that kill joy day-to-day. Chock full of stories that make you laugh and cry, the book shows you how to break your own patterns that may be keeping you from living your joy. These stories will undoubtedly resonate with aspects of your life in a particular way that will show you where change is needed.

Reading about these joy-attitudes and actions is a great place to start. However, after you have made a conscious decision to leave behind your old ways of thinking and acting, you still need to try out new behaviors, fall down, and keep trying until it gets easier. In this devotional guide, we will support you in taking action and forging ahead into real change through prayer, journaling, and/or digging deeper as part of a group with others. Paul reminds us in Philippians 3:12, "Not that I have already attained or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me." (NKJV)

This *Live Your Joy* devotional corresponds to the *Live Your Joy* book covering the same nine topics—chapter by chapter—for building your joy capacity: choosing joy, confidence, hope, positivity, authenticity, humility, friendship, resilience, and faith. This guide, however, goes much further than the book because it provides the scriptural

foundation and encouragement to become a person who can better accept God's joy.

It is our desire that you use this guide to become more Christ centered in how you feel about joy. We pray that as you work through the guide, your perspective on living a joyful life will be transformed and that you will be led into a deeper faith and understanding of who God is and wants to be in your life.

There are many ways you can take this journey – you can build it into a personal prayer routine, start a joy journal, go through it with a friend or prayer partner, or invite joy into a prayer or bible-study group. Do what is comfortable for you and do it at your own pace as God leads you.

Of course, our connection with God through prayer is the heart of any path forward. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17 Paul urges us to “pray without ceasing”. If you already have a prayer life, we encourage you to use this guide to take you deeper. If you do not already have a prayer life, we challenge you to begin one by using this guide to help you take the first step.

Prayer Partner

Going through the devotional with a friend or prayer partner creates a great opportunity to discuss your thoughts, feelings and insights along the way. It is also helpful to have someone who will hold you accountable and challenge you to stay on track. And of course, as we know, where two or more are gathered, He is there, so if you decide to go through the guide with a prayer partner think about turning it into a mini-prayer meeting.

Whatever frequency you set up, weekly, two weeks, or even monthly, you can meet in person or by phone. We suggest that you start each meeting with a prayer, read one topic, and discuss the questions and challenges to go deeper at the end of the topic section. During the week, each of you can read the corresponding chapter in the book, *Live Your Joy*, to reinforce the ideas as you practice them in the real world. You may also want to prayerfully commit to your partner that you will take certain actions or make changes in the time before your next meeting. Close with a prayer to strengthen you and your prayer partner for the journey.

At your next meeting, you can check in on whether you were able to accomplish your goals (or not—we are human!) and how the discussion topic showed up in your actions and attitudes. Sharing this journey with a partner will significantly increase your ability to learn to live your joy in the world; it can double your joy!

If you've decided a prayer partner feels right to you, take time now to list three potential prayer partners who could use more joy in their lives. Get in touch and if your first choice isn't available for this journey right now, keep trying until you find someone who is. You are on your way!

The Joy Journal

Some years ago Ana began incorporating journaling into her prayer life. She always keeps a journal next to her bed, which is usually where she prays. In addition, she keeps one in her briefcase, which is with her throughout the day. At one point in her life, she even had one in her car as well!

When she feels moved, she simply jots down the date and the things she prays about. Her prayers are not solely about her needs, but more often are about the needs of others around her – friends, family, and colleagues. There are two main reasons why she loves to journal as part of her prayer life and relationship with God. First, it builds her faith and trust in God because as time goes by she can look back at her prayer requests and see how they have been answered or replaced by something better that happened. And second it becomes her testimony that she can then share with family and friends about how faithful God has been in bringing her and others through a number of things.

Create a journal practice that works for you. Do you need several journals in different places like Ana? You can journal anywhere, anytime, as Ana does, when the spirit moves you. Similarly, you can read through *Live Your Joy* and the related devotional sections quickly or slowly depending on your schedule and mood. You may want to take longer with some chapters than others.

Alternatively, you may want to have a set pace such as a weekly commitment to read and journal. We recommend that you begin with a prayer that you will be fed understanding through the Holy Spirit as you read and journal. Then you can read one chapter in *Live Your Joy*

(they are short!), read the corresponding devotional section (even shorter), and journal your thoughts and reactions. The following week, you may want to take some time to journal about further thoughts on the last topic, before you tackle a new topic. What did you notice about your attitudes and behaviors? Were there positive changes? Strong resistance? Note answered or unanswered prayers, as well. Close your quiet time with another prayer.

Do you have obstacles to journaling time, like young children, aging parents or a job with frequent travel or late nights? Think through how you will find regular time for yourself to connect with God and joy despite the tumult of daily living.

Make a decision now, if you plan to journal, about the frequency, the book you will use to write in, and how you will remind yourself to take the time. Put your journal and reading time on your schedule.

Small Groups

If you already have a prayer or Bible-study small group, you can suggest the book and devotional as a way to make God's joy more present in everyday life. In the appendix at the end of this devotional, we have listed several specific suggestions to help small group leaders structure the material depending on the group size, time allotted, etc.

If you don't have a small group, you can find one or create one. Offer to host a group that focuses on joy and invite family, friends or members of your church. Who doesn't want more joy? Focusing on joy is also a wonderful way to introduce friends who don't normally attend church to God and the Bible.

A small group—three to seven people—can meet over a series of nine weeks to introduce the concept and cover each of the nine topics.

Alternatively, the material could be discussed in a half-day or full day retreat with hundreds of people. Give people time to reflect on topics in pairs, in groups or with a personal journal. Mix it up to align with different learning styles in the group.

If you think you would like to create a small group, read the appendix for group leaders, and then brainstorm with a friend, your pastor or someone else who might help you host a life-changing experience for you and a group of people who you care about.

Getting started

We hope you are as excited as we are about making more room in your life for God's joy to blossom. Prayerfully consider which path into God's joy is best for you at this time in your life: prayer partner, journaling, small group study, or a combination. They all work! Once you have chosen and prepared yourself, join us in praying this prayer as we move forward:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for the limitless joy that you have in store for us. Thank you for this opportunity to learn how to better receive this gift each and every day. Give me the strength to let go of old habits and take away the fears that block me from living joyfully. Open my heart and mind as I read, meditate, discuss and learn to live Your joy. Make me a vessel to carry your overflowing joy into the world to others who do not know You. When I learn to let Your joy shine through me, please use me to reach those who live in the darkness and free them from suffering.

I ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture meditation:

“This is the day that the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24 (NKJV)

Scripture is clear that we are to rejoice and be glad in each and every single day because it is another day that God has created for us. And in each day there is the expectation that we will fellowship with Him, that we will see His promises fulfilled, and that no matter what comes our way He already has the solution.

Thus, joy is something that starts on the inside, deep in our souls, at the moment of our creation. Having joy should not depend on external circumstances.

Yet there are hundreds of things in everyday life that keep us from being joyful. We let negative thinking move into our heads like an unwelcome houseguest that we feed and shelter. We get too busy with problems and simply have no time or space for joy in our lives. Yet we can choose to change our habits and beliefs.

If you are not choosing joy you have to ask yourself: What part of God you are not letting in to your life? Joy is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; a quality that lets others know God's presence is in your life. Choosing joy in a Christian life means accepting God's gift; the gift He has intended for us. And having a full reservoir of joy can only happen by spending time with God and opening yourself to the joy He has for you.

We have a powerful, awesome God – why shouldn't we rejoice? Why shouldn't we emanate the joy that comes with that knowledge? It is especially important for Christians to choose joy and to actively make time for it to take root and grow strong. What kind of example to the world around us are we if we let ourselves become downtrodden and negative? What does that say to those around us about God?

We can and should work on choosing joy each and every day. Even when we are grieving, a deep and quiet joy can be there for us as we feel love and comfort from God, friends, and/or family and extend it to others.

In *Live Your Joy* Chapter 1, there are several examples of how someone can change their actions and attitudes to experience more

joy instantaneously. Whether you already choose joy most of the time on a daily basis or not, the following questions for discussion and meditation will help you to boost your joy right now!

Going Deeper

1. Joy Self-Assessment

Is your joy running over? Or all run out? Think about the most joyful time in your life and rate that a ten. Think of the least joyful period and rate it a one. On that scale of one to ten, where is your joy reservoir now? Write down or discuss your thoughts. Remember that you can always raise the level of your joy reservoir because joy comes from the inside.

Rate your self again: How open are you to receiving joy or being joyful? (On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being very open to joy.)

2. Spend the next two days using the actor's exercise from *Live Your Joy*, Chapter 1:

Stop. Look. Listen. Consciously walk through your home environment not thinking or saying anything. What did you experience that brought you joy? What took you by surprise? Take note of your thoughts, observations, and prayers, or share them with your prayer partner or small group.

3. What has captivated you to the point of stealing your joy? Are you purely living from logic or stress with no regard for your own feelings or comfort as Bonnie described in *Live Your Joy*?

Think of some examples where you made logical decisions at the detriment of your own feelings or comfort. What was the outcome each time?

4. Instead of the usual "to do list," make your own "TO FEEL" list, as described in *Live Your Joy*, Chapter 1. Discuss your list with your small group, have a friend or your prayer partner hold you accountable, or journal about your feelings. Put the "TO FEEL" items on your calendar.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Psalm 17:11

Psalm 126:3

Galatians 5:22

Scripture meditation:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Romans 12:2 (NKJV)

Paul is clear that we are not to be conformed to the world around us even though we live it in daily. Being in the world, but not of the world, requires strength and confidence. The kind of confidence I am talking about is the kind you reach for deep inside when other people are pressuring you to not feel good about yourself or your circumstances. Not internalizing the expectations, negative thoughts and comments from society requires that your confidence be based solely on what God is able to do.

Living with Christian values and principles often makes a person seem strange or different from ordinary society. On television people talk about sex as if it were like going out for a fast food snack. In business and politics, people are still held in high esteem even if they have bullied others, cheated, and told lies to succeed. In this world, people who live with integrity and purity seem odd or weak. It takes a very strong confidence to dare to be different.

We all experience singular moments in life where you have to choose whether you are going to stand tall or follow the crowd. By thinking of confidence as a muscle it is easy to think about “working out” that muscle to make it stronger. Bonnie described how her confidence became very strong because she had to cope with kids teasing her on the playground because of her wooden leg and being underestimated in the business world as a short, black woman. That strength has helped her not to be afraid of being different as a Christian, either.

The level of confidence needed to live a Christian life doesn't just come naturally to anyone. Peter, when confronted by the crowd, lost his own confidence and denied Jesus three times. The good news, though, is that we can build confidence like we build muscles. Look at what God did with Peter...and Paul, too!

When the apostles first began preaching the gospel, they were not always welcomed wherever they went. Yet they drew strength from God and from each other. They learned to shake the dust off their feet from the towns that would not welcome them. They lived, worked and interacted with each place they visited, yet were not entangled in

the opinions and the thoughts of others toward them. Through God, they strengthened their confidence muscles.

Confidence, when defined as the ability to draw strength from God instead of mass culture, is a fundamental building block of joy. If you live from the outside in – waiting for others to make you happy – joy will always be a fleeting state. Alternatively, living from the knowledge in your heart that God loves you and has forgiven your sins, means that joy is constantly overflowing out of you. Coming from God, joy is always available.

Ultimately, we believe we have been able to stand in the face of tough life circumstances because our confidence comes from knowing that God will be our aide in prevailing against our fears, our lack of courage, and what others think.

Will you trust Him in this today? Will you let Him be the coach in your confidence workouts?

Going Deeper

1. Let's take a baseline measure of your confidence muscle. How confident do you feel overall? Are there specific occasions or people that you find you have a weak confidence muscle with? Who are they? And why?

Write about this in your joy journal or share these thoughts with your prayer partner or small group.

2. Do something in the coming week to “work out” your confidence muscle like going to a movie by yourself, volunteering to speak in public, or something that gets you outside your comfort zone. Make a list of things you are willing to do, to build your confidence muscle. Pick one item from your list and have your prayer partner or a friend hold you accountable to do it.

Write about this in your joy journal or share these thoughts with your prayer partner or small group.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Psalm 126:3

John 16:24

Scripture meditation:

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1 (NKJV)

In the book, *Live Your Joy*, Bonnie shares how the thought of going skiing was a Very Big Dream for a ten-year-old, African-American girl with one leg in a poor neighborhood of San Diego—with no snow! She shares other stories about encouraging people to see bigger possibilities for themselves, too.

Although everyone should aim higher in life, for Christians it should be much easier. Because God strengthens us beyond our own abilities, we can and should expect more from ourselves.

For inspiration, check out Hebrews 11. It reads like a biblical who’s who on hope. Just look at the things they had faith to believe for – a child in Sarah’s old age, the parting of the Red Sea, building the ark—major things that required nothing short of a miracle for them to be accomplished. These people hoped for things that none of them could take any personal credit for accomplishing and gave to God all the glory for coming through as He had promised. And with hope that is the key – not that you alone can get something beyond your reach accomplished, but that your hope is in God who can do all things. As a Christian you should have big hopes – after all, you serve a big God, and there is nothing impossible for God (Luke 1:37).

Scripture clearly encourages us to set high goals: Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:24); Where there is no vision, the people perish (Proverbs 29:18).

In Jeremiah 29:11, however, we are also reminded that God has plans for us; “plans to give us a future and a hope...” Our role, then, is to align ourselves with His plans and hopes. You can believe that His plans for us will be much greater, much more joy producing than the greatest things we can think of for ourselves.

So the bad news is: Our big goals may be superceded by His plans. And the good news is: Our big goals may be superceded by His plans.

Having a vision of where we want to go balanced with where we believe God is taking us is important. Flexibility is key in a relationship with the Lord, remembering that His word promises us in

1 Corinthians, that we can never imagine the things that He has planned for those that love Him.

Learn the rules for hope:

- Dream big. Don't play small if you are a child of God!
- Listen also for God's plan. It will take you higher.
- Give the glory to God. You didn't do it alone.

Going Deeper:

1. If you do not already have one, create a "Dream Portfolio" as described in *Live Your Joy*. What are some of the things you want to accomplish? Include long-shot possibilities, basic responsibilities to job/family and everything in between. What kind of spiritual growth do you aspire to? Include that also.

2. Commit your list above to God. Pray about your list. Lay these things at His throne and ask Him to show you His will in these things. Ask for guidance, timing, and wisdom.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Jeremiah 29:11-14

Luke 1:36-38

1 Corinthians 2:9

Luke 11:9

Romans 8:28

Hebrews 10:23

Isaiah 40:31

Scripture meditation:

"...whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things."

Philippians 4: 8 (NKJV)

Whatever we have in our heads and our hearts is clearly revealed when we open our mouths. That is why Paul is very clear about what we should focus on. In the story about Bonnie's former hairdresser, his negative conversation revealed a lot about his character. We can't seem to help it: "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7).

Yes, sometimes life is hard, and people are not kind and we just can't seem to get a break. However, if our focus is on Christ and what His word tells us, we know that He has it all handled. We can ask for strength to improve our lives, to be the solution for ourselves and others, rather than just casting blame and being miserable. If you are a child of the most-high God, you do not have to live as a victim.

As believer walking through this world it is also important that we manifest the love of Christ for others through our topics of conversation. We can be a source of encouragement and our joy can be contagious. Neither of us can say we do it perfectly all the time—we enjoy a pity party, too, when times are tough. But when we realize what we are doing to others and what we are thus communicating about our faith, it makes both of us want to strive to eliminate our natural tendency to gripe.

Negativity not only impacts those around us but it also damages our relationship with God. Oswald Chambers, in his well-known book *My Utmost for His Highest* wrote about contempt and criticism saying, "What we must beware of is not damage to our belief in God but damage to our Christian disposition or state of mind. Our state of mind is powerful in its effects. There are certain attitudes we should never dare to indulge. If we do, we will find they have distracted us from faith in God." ("The Distraction of Contempt," *My Utmost for His Highest*, November 23) The book of Malachi also warns us, "Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

Going Deeper:

1. Meditate on how you typically think about life. Is the glass half empty or half full? Do you allow negative thoughts or criticism into your everyday conversation? Do you allow yourself to listen to people who are negative?
2. Make a list of the things you have to be grateful for in your life past or present. Did you feel your perspective and mindset literally begin changing as you realized all the things you have to be thankful for?
3. Try the PPP method for fighting negative thoughts. When a negative thought enters your mind, **Praise** God, **Pray**, or quote a **Passage** from the Bible to push it back out. At first this may be difficult given the number of negative thoughts in our environment. If you stick with it, however, it can cause profound change.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Matthew 15:11
Proverbs 23:6-8
Proverbs 15:30
Psalm 30:10-12
Titus 3:2

Scripture meditation:

So Saul clothed David with his armor, and he put a bronze helmet on his head; he also clothed him with a coat of mail. David fastened his sword to his armor and tried to walk, for he had not tested them. And David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these, for I have not tested them." So David took them off. (1 Samuel 17:38-39 NKJV)

The story of how David defeated Goliath as a youth has many lessons for us to learn – obedience, faith, wisdom, and boldness among them. But what has always struck me is that David really knew who he was.

In verse 38 when Saul offers David his armor, isn't it remarkable that the little shepherd boy had the guts to say, "No thanks" to a King?!

Everyone would have been shocked and horrified when David refused to wear armor into battle. Oh, and not just any armor. That armor must have been inlaid with jewels and gilded with precious metal. It must have been the finest craftsmanship. It must have been hard to resist the temptation of that false sense of security and grandeur. It must have been difficult to resist the advice of his older brothers, other soldiers, and especially a King!

Yet, David was being truly authentic to himself as a child of God. That armor was much too big and made it hard for him to walk. It was not equal to the protection he had by seeing himself as God created him: with a unique set of talents and skills. Basically David was saying, "I don't need to pretend to be something that I am not to fight giants. I know who I am and what I need to do to come out of this victorious."

David knew that God had been preparing him for this moment even while he tended sheep. You will always find people in your path, including family, who have dozens of suggestions on how you should do things, but only one opinion matters – God's.

David had no desire to fit into someone else's shoes—or armor in this case. He wasn't trying to keep up with his siblings on the battlefield or their friends. He wasn't trying to get his name on the A-list of the victory party after the battle. Can any of us say the same on any given day? How many people are living outside their means trying to keep up with the Joneses? How many women under go cosmetic surgery trying to become someone else? Or how many of us are living

the dreams our family had for us or living the lives those around us think we should be living? We cannot live the joy God intended for us when we reject the gift He gave us: our lives. You can't live YOUR joy if you aren't being you.

Today, make a decision to walk in your own shoes, in your own path, according to your own dreams and your own calling because only you can be the person God created when He made you.

Going deeper:

1. Take a moment to think about the various relationships in your life. Are there times where you struggle to be authentic? Why?
2. What is your "Goliath"?
3. Who are the people in your life that help you become a better you? The people that help you grow and nourish you without asking you to be someone else?

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Exodus 20:17

Acts 20:33

Luke 12:15

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Scripture meditation:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong." 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (NKJV)

Being helpable is key to achieving your full potential and receiving the joy that comes with it. No person is an island. When you look at the things successful people have achieved there is a direct connection with the amount of help they get from those around them. We see God answering a request from Paul in 2 Corinthians with the phrase we all know so well, "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." In other words God is saying to Paul, "If you are going to be strong Paul and have it all together then no one will see how powerful I can be through you."

And Paul understood what God taught him. In most of Paul's letter we see him thanking brethren for their help and/or asking for continued help and support. Paul may not have been able to accomplish what he accomplished for the Kingdom of God if he had not understood that God had sent him help both through supernatural ways and through the people God had placed in his life.

Trying to do everything by ourselves not only limits our ability to accomplish things, it is a very big joy killer. It can be tempting because, as the saying goes, "If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself." But as we take on more and more, we have more stress, more exhaustion, less creativity, and ultimately...no time or energy for joy.

There are times in life that letting others help you is not just about getting something done, its about creating a bond and a deeper relationship with the people around us. Most of us get real joy from helping others. Yet we do not give the same gift of joy by letting others help us. Paul writes about the joy and thankfulness he felt at remembering what some of the brethren around the world did for him in various books of the New Testament. And undoubtedly, the people who helped him received a great deal of joy in giving of themselves.

How many people are you depriving of the gift of joy by not being helpable?

Going deeper:

1. What is your mental image of being helpable? Is it strength? Weakness? Vulnerability?
2. How do you stop others from helping you? Think about your actions, words, etc.
3. Is there an area of your life that you need to surrender more to God and accept the help He gives you through those around you?
4. Who is the person or people you need to be more helpable with? Your children? Your co-workers? Particular friends?

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Proverbs 16:18

Isaiah 29:19

1 Peter 5-7

Scripture mediation:

“For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” Romans 12:4-5 (NKJV)

Imagine that Bonnie’s artificial leg decided it doesn’t need her anymore and it is going to do its own thing. It is almost too ridiculous to think about! Yet, as Christians how often do we think we can go it alone? Like the leg, we were custom made to connect with other people. In Chapter 6, we took a look at the humility needed to be helpable. When we learn to connect with people and form meaningful friendships becoming helpable gets a lot easier...so joy gets easier, too.

In *Live Your Joy*, Bonnie shared how connecting with people in a deep way was not always easy for her. Like many survivors of abuse her emotions were shut down and her ability to trust others was severely damaged. She had to learn to open up instead of shutting down and going it alone. And when she did stretch outside her comfort zone to risk connection, she found joy there.

Bonnie also points out in *Live Your Joy* that it is up to us to make sure our friendships are real, authentic friendships that contribute to our joy and well being. Sometimes people (inside and outside the church) call themselves your friend while lying to you, putting you down, or acting in other toxic ways. We must ask for change or admit that these are not friendships after all.

When friendships are genuine, connecting with other people, especially other Christians makes us more joyful. God will use the people that are in our lives to reach us, to pray with us, to accompany us, to weep with us and to laugh with us. Jesus did not go through His earthly ministry alone – he had the disciples. He asked them to join Him on journeys, and in prayer, and ultimately called them friends (John 5:15). Despite the difficult path His life had to take, the disciples were part of the plan to help Him keep his joy reservoir filled up.

In fact, we are commanded to connect with each other in a deeply personal way. In John 15:12 Jesus gives us a new commandment,

“This is my commandment, that you love one another”. (NKJV) And because He knows we sometimes need things repeated, He tells us again a few verses later in John 15:17, “These things I command you, that you love one another.” (NKJV) God is the ultimate friend. He created us for relationship with Him. When there was no other way to bridge the gap that sin had created between Himself and us, He sent His Son, stripped of His deity, God in human flesh – Jesus, to bridge the gap. And we are reminded “greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” John 15:13-14 (NKJV).

Friendship as described by Christ in the scriptures will inspire us and motivate us to do things we would normally not do in a million years – like the way Bonnie drove in the snow for the first time, despite her fears. Connecting with people will open not only the doors of opportunity, but the doors of our hearts. Our connections often transform us in wonderful and unthinkable ways that will lead us to a place where God’s gift of joy can be received.

Going deeper:

1. What aspects of this chapter in the book and devotional have spoken to you the most? Take time in prayer and meditation to give this some thought. Whatever section struck a chord is probably an area God wants to draw your attention.
2. Do you shut down making it difficult for others in your circle to get in? Are there certain people or small groups of people you find it harder/easier to open up to?
3. List some ways that you shut others off – body language, certain key words or phrases, etc. Spend the next couple of days paying attention to these signs and pray as you feel yourself building distance between you and others.
4. If you are the type of person that finds it easy to open up and connect with people, we encourage you to pray for friends and family that you know have a hard time with this. Pray that God will heal them of whatever causes them to shut themselves off and release an abundance of joy in their lives. Pray and ask God to use you in helping others connect and thank Him for the gift of not having to go through life alone.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

I John 4:12

John 5:14-16
John 15:9-17

Scripture meditation:

“Not that I have already attained or an already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.” Philippians 3:12 (NKJV).

Bonnie’s testimony on resilience is compelling because she has been through so much—abuse, surgeries on her leg, not having a father to raise her. And she credits God with giving her the strength to not only stay standing, but to live with joy.

But even more powerful than her story, is Paul’s life. I don’t know if you could find a more resilient person than Paul. Paul was beaten, threatened, hated, ship wrecked, jailed countless number of times and run out of a number of towns. These are just to name of few in the long list of things Paul had to live through. Paul knew hardships that many of us will never face. Yet when you read Paul’s letters in the New Testament his joy and humility come through in his writings. Paul was a great example of someone with a deep joy from within in the face of horrible circumstances. So who better to take advice from when he encourages us to “press on”? Knowing the life he led you can almost see the sweat on his brow as he forges ahead with all his might to take hold what Christ had for him.

It is humbling to look at the life of Paul and the joy he had in his heart. In today’s world we act like it’s a tragedy when we have a difficult boss, our travel plans fall apart while we sit in a crowded airport, or the traffic in your town keeps getting worse. Bonnie shared her story of being exhausted and burnt out by the very blessings in her life.

This is not to downplay the challenge of real tragedies in life – such as the loss of a loved one, financial ruin, or cancer. But Paul knew what so many of us have to learn – Joy is not just on the other side of a bad situation, joy can exist even in the midst of a terrible situation. There is joy in the process of bouncing back and rebounding from difficulty when we include God in the process.

Going deeper:

1. Can you find joy in the midst of your current situation? If not what is blocking your focus on God?

2. Sit quietly and ask God to show you ways that you can focus more on your relationship with Him in the midst of your current situation.

3. Getting up – what are some of the tools you can begin to use to help you bounce back from a bad situation or the hectic pace of life? Ask God to show you the people, knowledge and actions you need to focus on.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

Hebrews 12:1

Ecclesiastes 3

John 16:22

Psalm 51:11-13

Scripture meditation:

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

We are not designed to work without God. To try to live life without God is a sure way of missing out on joy. We may have moments of happiness, but never achieve the joy that comes from God’s presence deep within our souls. It’s a chain reaction: The more our faith grows, the more we let Him in; and the more we let Him in the more joy we have access to; and the more joy we have, the more we can live joyful lives from the inside out.

There will be days when faith will be hard to summon up. We all have our moments. But faith is so powerful that with the tiniest amount of it we can see miracles. How tiny? Well in Matthew 17:20 Jesus tells us, “For assuredly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’, and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.” (NKJV) Have you ever seen a mustard seed? It is unbelievably small. And yet we are assured that if our faith was even that small we could do something that seems impossible.

Faith in God is the foundation of all the joy skills. This foundation of faith will free you from whatever your past holds and give you a present filled with joy and peace that passes all understanding. As we have seen in our chapter-by-chapter study of joy, God makes each one work better: more strength for confidence, authenticity in who we are created to be, and more.

Faith is what stirs us up to believe His word, which tells us that He has great plans for us; that we should be confident in His strength and power in our lives. It is through faith that our hope increases and it is through faith that we grow closer to Him. And our proximity to Him will draw others and infect them with our God-given joy.

Going deeper:

1. Has your faith been tested to the point of almost giving up on God to come through?
2. Mediate and pray: Bonnie leaned on God like the outrigger she used to ski on one leg. What is your “outrigger”? What are you

leaning on for strength? Is it your faith in God or have you been trying to “fit in” by competing socially and looking good?

3. As you end this study and pray time about joy, review the progress in your journal or reflect with others over each of the topics. Where have the biggest changes occurred in your life?

4. What’s next? Will you continue more frequently or less often? Will you continue with journaling or switch to a small group or prayer partner support (or vice versa)? Make a commitment now so that you keep the momentum of your spiritual growth.

Additional scriptures to ponder:

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Matthew 17:14-21

Galatians 2:20

Thanks for joining us on the joy journey with God, scripture and each other.

Blessings and love,

Bonnie and Ana

APPENDIX

Small Group Leader's Guide

If you are thinking and praying about taking a small group through *Live your Joy* and the *Live your Joy Devotional*, below are some suggestions to help you get started. This is not an exhaustive list of topics or ideas, just something to get you started on your journey. As a small group leader, you know the members of your group and their individual needs and can create a list of topics and exercises that will best suit the group instead of or in addition to the ones listed here.

Settings for using Live Your Joy

Live Your Joy can serve as a useful tool to guide and inspire those seeking to build and enhance their personal prayer life and move into a life filled with more of God's joy. For a robust group discussion, the book and the devotional should be used together. *Live Your Joy* and the accompanying devotional guide are ideal for personal quiet time, church Bible study groups, evangelism and outreach, Sunday school and in any type of group setting where two or more are gathered in His name. For purchases of 10 or more books, you can contact Bonnie directly at bonnie@bonniestjohn.com, to arrange for discounts.

Vacation Bible School:

To use *LIVE YOUR JOY* as the curriculum for an adult VBS class, discuss one or two of the sections in each session, for example:

Day One: Open study and Choose Joy (Ch. 1)

Day Two: Being Authentic & Building Confidence – Joy's Main Muscle (Ch. 2 & 5)

Day Three: Hope and a Positive Attitude (Ch. 3 & 4)

Day Four: Humility and Friendship – Being Helpable (Ch. 6 & 7)

Day Five: Resilience & Faith: Fall down, Get Up, Rely on the Rock (Ch. 8 & 9)

For Vacation Bible Schools that are longer, you can go through a chapter a day instead of the recommended breakdown above. Alternatively, if standard VBS curriculum is being used, you could briefly discuss one chapter topic at the beginning or close of each VBS lesson.

Church Bible Study Group:

Use *LIVE YOUR JOY* and the Devotional as the main study guide and tool for a study on Joy. Each time the group meets consider what the main topic will be based on the sections of the book you may be covering that particular day. If you want to engage in a longer study of *LIVE YOUR JOY*, break the chapters up and allow greater discussion within the group and reflect on key points in each chapter. Delving deeper into the devotional guide questions is a good way to have a more robust study. You can also use the guidelines above for a Vacation Bible School and cover a chapter a week.

Sunday School Class:

Combine *LIVE YOUR JOY* with a close-ended study on joy. For a Sunday School Class you can follow the same format as the Vacation Bible School outline above.

Evangelism and outreach:

Use *LIVE YOUR JOY* as an evangelistic tool to reach out to those around you who may be struggling with various life circumstances that impacts their joy. Especially during tough economic times, periods of uncertainty, and any other thing that life brings with it that decreases our joy – people of all cultures, professions, and socioeconomic levels struggle with joy every now and then.

Tips for enhancing small group experiences

Use the following ideas to enhance your teaching/learning experience using *LIVE YOUR JOY*:

1. Use presentation software such as PowerPoint to project key phrases from the section on which you are working. For example, if your group is studying about “Humility” in Chapter 6, focus your prayer with 2 Corinthians 12: 9-10 on the screen alongside a question from the study guide such as: “Is there an area of your life that you need to surrender more to God and accept the help He gives you through those around you?” As a group you can pray on the scripture and the question quietly together before discussing where you feel God is leading you.
2. Choose several quotations from the book and write them on an index card. Give each member of the group one or more cards. For

silent prayer, each member should read his/her card silently and proceed with prayer. For group prayer, ask a member to read a quote aloud and proceed with prayer.

3. A member may read a passage from the book aloud or role-play a contributor's story or experience before the group. Next the group could pray silently on the subject. Then everyone would discuss what they learned and can apply in their own life.
4. Write quotes from the book on slips of paper. Place the slips into a glass jar or some other container. Pass the container to group members and ask them to pull one. Ask group members to read the quote to the group and initiate a prayer related to those circumstances.

Most of all make your devotional experience joyful...because receiving God's gift of joy is what it's all about! For further questions and ideas, please contact bonnie@bonniestjohn.com or anamims@mac.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ana Mollinedo Mims

Originally born in Havana, Cuba, Ana Mollinedo Mims is a seasoned corporate executive and author with expertise in industries such as pharmaceuticals and health care, hospitality and travel, telecommunications, cement, manufacturing, agrichemical, media, and retail. She has worked for Fortune 500 companies for over 23 years regionally and globally and has built a solid track record of working with CEOs, Boards, and Executive teams to increase market share using innovative strategies.

She served as a national spokesperson for the Catalyst study, *Latinas in the Workplace: What Companies and Managers Need to Know*, she has written a number of articles in her area of expertise, and has been interviewed on a number of radio and TV programs including The Today Show and Hispanics Today. In 2006, Profiles in Diversity named her as one of their *Women to Watch in Business*. She has written articles and has appeared on television and in numerous business magazine interviews, including the cover of Black Enterprise.

In addition to her corporate career, Ana is also author of *Keeping The Faith*, which received honorable mention at the 2008 International Latin Book Awards. In *Keeping the Faith*, Ana discusses her spirit-led career and lessons and stories about bridging the gap between faith and the workplace. It is her heart's desire that her life serve as an example to Christians and non-Christians that God is as involved in our life at work as in our life at church, and the workplace is as much of a mission as any other place where Christ is not known.

Visit Ana on the web at www.anamollinedomims.com.

Facebook: search for **Ana Mollinedo Mims** and **Prayer Breakfast**

Bonnie St. John

Bonnie St. John is an author, inspirational speaker, executive coach, TV personality, mother, and seeker of wisdom. Bonnie has suffered through many of the difficulties most discussed today: abuse, disability, and struggles related to gender or race. Despite these challenges, she has relentlessly sought ways to stay positive and live joyfully no matter what life dishes out. Her deep sense of peace and joy in life has inspired millions of people to want to know what she has learned about finding joy in a crazy world.

Her message of falling down and getting up—in life, at an Olympic ski race, or in business—has been sought after by CEOs, recognized in the White House, celebrated on a Starbucks Cup and honored with a doctoral degree for her lifetime commitment to motivating people. More than hope, Bonnie provides practical tips, step-by-step directions, and presents the very latest in social research in an easy-to-use way.

Bonnie is also the author of *How Strong Women Pray*, in which she takes you with her on a spiritual journey to learn about the power of prayer in the real world. Through intimate interviews with some of America's most notable women including; Maya Angelou, Edie Falco, Barbara Bush, and Kathie Lee Gifford, as well as some lesser known yet equally extraordinary: a Hurricane Katrina rescuer, an NYPD 9/11 first responder, a soldier in Afghanistan, and many others, you will find insight into the actual details—where, when, how long—of the way strong women use prayer to cope with challenges in their everyday lives.

Woven throughout these stories is Bonnie's own struggle to find strength in prayer. The rawness with which she expresses her experiences and the courage she musters to face challenge after challenge is profoundly inspiring.

Visit Bonnie on the web at www.bonniestjohn.com.

Youtube: www.youtube.com/bonniestjohn.com.

Facebook: search for **Bonnie Lee St. John** and **Live Your Joy** and **Prayer Breakfast**.