

Bonnie St. John: Accepting the Gift of Joy

Bonnie St. John has accomplished more in her life than most  can dream of. Silver and bronze medals as an Olympic ski racer. An honors degree from Harvard. A Rhodes scholarship to Oxford. An appointment to the White House National Economic Council. To top it off, she's even been quoted on millions of Starbucks cups.

But St. John has also endured unimaginable obstacles. As a child, the growth in her right leg was stunted, and when she was 5 years old her leg had to be amputated. The challenges of being an amputee could have been enough to discourage her, yet her perseverance drove her to becoming the first African-American to win medals in ski racing at the 1984 Paralympics.

On the home front, she's endured hardship after hardship: From the age of 2 to 7 she was sexually abused by her stepfather. To this day, one side of her family does not acknowledge being related to her because she is black. She has experienced the gut-wrenching pain of a divorce. And she's also a single mother.

With everything St. John has gone through, it's hard to imagine that she would not be bitter and devastated. But she chooses to live with joy and shares this life lesson (along with plenty of others) in her new book, *Live Your Joy*, so others can experience the same freedom.

For St. John, life is proof that you can choose joy no matter what. We have to accept God's gift of joy in our lives, she says. And though she knows accepting joy isn't always easy, she explains that having joy is like a garden—you have to work in order to have the gifts. “We have to cultivate the attitudes and the behaviors that allow joy to come in our

life," she says. "We have to choose not to listen to negativity. We have to choose to take time to feel joy, to look at the flower, to feel the love from our family members, to send a note of appreciation."

She also warns us to not to get sucked into comparing horror stories about what is going wrong in our lives. Instead, engage in behavior that creates positivity. When we live with joy we will also be better examples as Christians. "By really having the internal disciplines to be joyful and to rejoice in each and every day that we've been given, we become a light that others will want to follow," she says.

Is it possible to have joy in these hard times? Absolutely—though St. John warns readers who think simply changing their situation will make them joyful. In fact, she argues that the opposite is true: "If you can really connect with God's joy, that will give you the strength and the energy and the faith to turn your situation around."

Never one to present a problem without offering a solution, St. John presents practical action points to cultivate and nurture joy. For example, she keeps a "joy first aid kit" that she can open on a bad day and remember things that make her happy. Her kit includes a note from her mother, baby pictures of her daughter, chocolate, bubble bath and the New Testament, among other things. She advises others to have a similar back-up plan, even if it's just writing a list of things that cheer you up so on dark days you can be reminded of everything you have. "Appreciating everything God has given you already ... helps you to focus on that and not what you don't have."

Most importantly, St. John reminds us that as we are seeking joy we can turn to God. "Let God help you choose joy," she says. "If you're struggling, ask God to help you."

Simple words. Yet coming from someone who's refused to take on bitterness and hatred but instead has chosen to "live her

joy," they take on a different, powerful meaning.

St. John offers a free companion devotional to download at . This study is for individuals or groups that wish to dive deeper into the topics covered in Live Your Joy. To purchase her book click here.