

*choose
joy*

living life beyond your circumstances

Sandra Bivens Smith



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SANDRA BIVENS SMITH

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This work is dedicated to my family. Each one of you, in your own special way give meaning to my life and bring JOY to my heart.

To my adored husband, you keep me going.

To my precious children, you keep me hopeful.

To my cherished grandchildren, you keep me on my toes.

To my sisters and brother, you know where all the skeletons are buried – you keep me humble.

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Forward

This study has been a work in progress for a long time, years even. As I have tried to write it, it seems I have encountered roadblocks at every turn. I will not bore you with the details except to say that the obstacles have not only deterred the work, they have also managed to discourage the writer. There came a time when I doubted whether the study would happen at all; I questioned if it was even meant to be. Yet, in spite of all the doubts, the determination and desire to share the words would not go away. Maybe it was my own expectations, or maybe just a matter of timing, I cannot say. In spite of all the doubts, I knew that there was a message and I felt compelled to share it. What I had to figure out was how to get the words onto the pages.

With much prayer and quite a few tears, I finally came to the conclusion that the struggle was because I was not living the joy that I was trying to write about. I was not choosing joy and certainly was not living life beyond my circumstances. It might be funny if it was not so sad – to think that a study on joy would cause such grief!

Have you ever known someone who can find the down side to everything in life? They are miserable people who, it seems, are determined to make everyone around them just as miserable as they are. The following is a sampling of what I mean.

“I lost my job and I don’t know what I’m going to do. Life isn’t fair.”

“I have a new job and the pay is better than my old job, but I have to be at work really early. It’s just not fair.”

“I wish my husband made more money so we could have nicer things. It’s so unfair.”

“My husband works all the time. He never spends time with me or the kids. It’s not fair.”

No doubt about it, these people have serious joy deficiency. They go through life with a storm cloud above their head. You most likely avoid them whenever possible. If you have any of these *Les Miserables* in your life, and I am betting you do, you know how quickly they can bring you down. Maybe we would have pity for them if they would give us a chance and stop pitying themselves for just a moment. I am not trying to be unkind here, I am simply being real.

Before we get too smug, we might want to pause and take a look in the mirror. If we are not careful, you and I can get into that same mindset. When we go through a rough patch in life, we can easily take a wrong turn and end up on the Woe Is Me Highway. It is the goal of this study to help us avoid that road because it is one that leads to a most miserable place.

A favorite poem of mine is Robert Frost's “Road Not Taken”. It is the story of a young man who must make a choice. Throughout our lives, every day of our lives, we have to make choices. Some of our choices are simple and relatively inconsequential – what to wear, what to have for lunch, what to watch on TV. Then there are other choices, hard choices. Choices that have long-term, sometimes even life changing consequences.

Joy is a choice. The verb form of joy means to experience great pleasure or delight. How we experience life is a choice. Have you ever noticed how the attitude with which you begin your day affects how the rest of your day goes? At least that is true for me. If I start out in a sour mood, it seems everything I encounter throughout the day will have a sour note. Conversely, when I begin my day with a positive, take on the world mindset, everything looks brighter and even traffic cannot get me down! I can start my day on a high note or on a low note, the choice is mine.

As I spent time in the book of Philippians, I came to realize that joy is not a response to life's circumstances. joy is what gets us through the circumstances. Joy is what makes it possible to get out of bed in the morning even when our world is falling apart. Joy is the thing that keeps us going when our mind is screaming "give up". Joy is what makes everything else matter.

"Choose Joy" is based on the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians. The counsel Paul gives comes from his own, often tragic experiences. This letter is Paul's personal testimony to God's provision.

As we study, we will see how Paul's trust in Christ got him through situations most of us could not begin to imagine. We will see how, in spite of all his trials, Paul never lost his joy. We will learn that what got Paul through his storms can get you and me through ours.

About The Study

As with most things, success takes time, preparation, thought, and determination. If you want to come away from this study with more joy, there are some things you will need to do.

Ask

Ask yourself the question “Do I want more joy in my life”? Consider carefully before answering. The question is not about having more happiness, more contentment, more success, or more satisfaction. The question is do you want more joy? If your answer is yes, and I certainly hope that it is, you will need to ask yourself a second question, what am I willing to do about it?

Discover

Read the book of Philippians. Begin by simply reading it through. At this point you don't need to pause for reflection or to make notes, just read. After you have read through the book, read again with a highlighter in hand. This time as you read, mark every reference you see to joy.

Understand

Before you begin the study, set firmly in your mind exactly what joy means to you. On a note card, in your journal, in the margin of your bible, wherever you will be continually reminded, write a brief statement of your own definition of joy.

Choose

Once you've identified what joy means to you, make note of the circumstances in your life that seem to constantly steal

your joy. As you go through the study, keep an eye out for the passages that speak to your individual pursuit and hindrances. Mark or write down those passages.

The Goal

Full disclosure. This is not a study about making us feel good. As a matter of fact, there is a good chance that we will come to a point in this study where we are going to feel pretty lousy. That's okay, it will get better. Do not give up.

As we study Paul's writings to the Philippians we will identify five principles that, when put into practice, will help us experience more joy in our lives.

- We will learn that in spite of all the uncertainties of life, joy is not only possible, it is promised!
- We will learn that we can experience joy that will make a difference not only in our own lives but also in the lives of those whose lives we touch.
- We will learn that every day that we choose joy, will be a day lived victoriously.

By studying and applying God's truths, we can have a joy that will help us to have a more powerful testimony; one that will glorify God.

PRINCIPLE 1: A Thankful Heart

I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. (Psalm 9:1)

joy begins with a thankful heart.

Recently I became aware that I was in the habit of beginning my prayer time by asking. I realized that I was telling God what I wanted Him to do, reminding Him of the needs. I further realized that too often it was not until the end of my prayer time that I thought to thank God for what He had already done, if I even thought to thank Him at all. How backwards is that?

By Paul's example, we come to realize the extent to which God has gone to meet our needs and the many reasons He has given us to be thankful. In his opening words to the Philippians, Paul mentions three things for which he is thankful:

- His fellow believers
- His ministry and the church
- His circumstances

In other words, Paul was thankful for all the things that would ultimately bring glory to God.

Paul was thankful for his fellow believers.

Throughout Paul's writings, we see his love and concern for the brethren. In all but four of his thirteen epistles, Paul opens his letters specifically letting those to whom he is writing know that not only is he praying for them, but that he thanks God for them. What a great model for us.

We worship together, we pray together, we fellowship. Hopefully, we show our appreciation for one another. But, do we have that thankful heart that we see in Paul? Do we thank God at every remembrance of those with whom we minister and fellowship? I cannot help but wonder what a difference it would make, in our individual relationships and in the life of our churches, if our hearts were more thankful for each other.

Paul was thankful for his ministry and the church.

In his letter to the Philippians, as well as in his letters to other churches, Paul talks about the many obstacles of his ministry. Rather than complaining however, he turns each obstacle into a reason to praise God.

- He was put in prison – his imprisonment gave courage to others.
- There were those who were preaching for their own selfish ambition – Christ’s name was being proclaimed.
- He knew that he would likely die for the faith – he would be with the Lord.

Paul kept his focus on his mission not on his misery. He knew that the work God had given him was more important than his own needs. Paul understood that he had been entrusted with the building up of the Church of Jesus Christ and he was thankful to have been called to so high a calling.

In the kingdom of God, there is plenty of work for all of us. Jesus said, *The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few* (Matthew 9:37b). God doesn’t need us in order to accomplish His purposes. God is omnipotent. That means He is all powerful, that He can do all things.

For His own reasons God has chosen us to be His hands and feet. He graciously allows us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. God chose to give us the opportunity to invest in eternity. Because He has so entrusted us, surely God is not pleased when we reject His blessing. When our hearts are truly thankful, not only will we have a desire to serve, we, like Paul will consider it an honor to serve.

Paul was thankful for his circumstances.

Of all that Paul was thankful for, the fact that he was thankful for his circumstances is something I can barely comprehend. The many trials and tribulations Paul endured are unimaginable. We have a detailed account of some of his suffering in 2 Corinthians.

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:23-28)

As if all this wasn't enough, we learn in the following chapter of 2 Corinthians that Paul was given what he referred to as a thorn in his flesh.

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. (2 Corinthians 12:7)

All of Paul's suffering did not come as a surprise to him. We read in the book of Acts that it was prophesied to Paul that he would suffer and even die for the ministry! And yet, even knowing what lay ahead for him, Paul obeyed the call of Christ to take the gospel to a lost and dying world.

But the Lord said to him (Ananias), Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. (Acts 9:15-16)

And coming to us, he (Agabus) took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to

Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, Let the will of the Lord be done. (Acts 21:11-14)

In spite of this Paul tells the Philippians:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel (Philippians 1:12).

How was it possible for Paul to have such a thankful heart? For one thing, Paul was a big picture guy. He didn't focus on his circumstances, he looked beyond them. He didn't look inward, he looked upward.

Do you remember Paul's thorn in the flesh? The scripture tells us that he asked three times for Christ to remove it but God said no. Paul didn't get discouraged and quit, he didn't "ask why me Lord"? Paul trusted God's sovereignty. Paul trusted that his weaknesses would ultimately result in his good. Paul knew that his suffering would bring God glory. To Paul, it was worth any cost.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)

If we were to do an in-depth study of Paul's life, we would find that his mental and emotional suffering was as great as his physical sufferings. He was mocked and persecuted. His ministry was constantly brought into question within the churches to which he devoted his life. I am confident that Paul must have taken his comfort from the words of Jesus *If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. (John 15:18)*

With all the accolades, let us not forget that Paul was just a man. In many of his writings he freely admits his weaknesses

and imperfections. But in the end, Paul always came back to the only thing that really mattered – the glory of Jesus Christ. Oh, to be like Paul. To be able to boldly say in every situation:

I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:12-13)

Just as Paul was able to rise above his adversities, we too have the power to live our lives beyond our circumstances. It will happen when we look beyond the circumstances. When, with thankful hearts we turn to Jesus Christ, understanding that our strength is in Him.

Before we leave our chapter on thankfulness, I want to take a minute to further encourage you. It is selfishness, not thankfulness that comes naturally to fallen man. It is because of this that we need the assurance of Philippians 4:13. When we give ourselves over to Christ, when we seek to have a thankful heart, joy will not be our only reward. Read what James has to say on the subject.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

In this passage, James tells us that if we will look to our future glory, rather than our present suffering, we will not only come through the trial, we will be rewarded with –

Stronger faith ■ Greater endurance ■ Lacking nothing

In Summary

As I read about Paul and his struggles, I have to say I am made mindful of how much I have to be thankful for, and how lacking I am in giving thanks. It is a realization that gives me a sense of shame. Watching Paul deal with some pretty difficult people, in some pretty scary situations, brings me face to face with my own pettiness.

When we started this study, I asked the question “do you want more joy”? It was really intended as a mostly redundant question. After all, who doesn't want more joy? However, what I am finding as we dig deeper into Paul's life, is that getting to the place of more joy is not as easy as one might think.

As we move forward in our study we will no doubt continue to be challenged in many ways. I am pretty sure there is going to be some personal pain we will have to go through before we achieve our goal of being ever ready to choose joy. There will be much self-examination to be done. Most of us will find some not-so-pretty areas to be uncovered. But of this I am confident, if we will stay the course, we will arrive at that place of joy. The joy that Jesus wants to give us. The joy that Jesus promised can be ours. His joy.

And so, in the words of Paul, we press on.

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