



*There is no human love like a mother's love. There is no human tenderness like a mother's tenderness. . . . In all ages everywhere, the true children of a true mother "rise up and call her blessed"; for they realize, sooner or later, that God gives no richer blessing to man than is found in a mother's love.*

*Henry Clay Trumbull*

Hints on Child Training



*Chapter One*  
*Celebrating Life*

*Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances,  
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*



**M**onday morning was here again . . . *already*. I'd barely made a dent in my To Do list from last week, and now I had a whole new mental list that was growing longer with each room I walked through. Wherever I looked there was a project—put the library in order, organize the kitchen, get the carpet cleaned, pick out toys to give away, thin out our clothes closets, put up new curtains, sort all my paper piles into files, and on it went. What sent my frustration meter climbing steadily toward an inevitable overload, though, was the extra layer of mess that seemed to cover everything in every room.

Someone had detonated a stuff-bomb in our home over the weekend. It must have been a big one because the explosion had scattered its shrapnel to every corner of the house. Wherever I looked there were Lego pieces, little cars, piles of books and papers, mail stacks, newspapers, diapers, toys, orphaned



socks and shoes, unpacked backpacks, coffee cups, half-filled glasses, and at least a closet full of discarded-where-it-was-removed clothing. My children seemed blissfully unaware of the mess around them as they played on the floor or read on the couch.

Of course, the house hadn't fallen apart in one weekend. We were still trying to recover from a year of expanding ministry, pregnancy, and birth after having added onto the existing family home when we moved to Walnut Springs in central Texas. My frustration from feeling unable to subdue my home "domain" had been slowly building over the previous months, but I had managed to maintain at least a semblance of order that kept my irritation in check. Recently, though, with a new baby in the house, things had fallen further and further into disarray as I focused my attention on Joy. Now as I surveyed the mess, and my mess-resistant children, the out of control clutter pushed me over the edge.

My unsuspecting children didn't see it coming and had nowhere to hide as their gentle Mommy was transformed before their eyes into Sergeant Mom, USMC. Barking out orders like a seasoned drill instructor, I sternly warned, "I'm going next door, and when I return I expect to see this mess cleaned up! This is unacceptable! Do you understand?" With fearful eyes and cowered postures, they soberly nodded and "yes ma'am'd" their acknowledgment of my orders. Still simmering with parental indignation, I did an about-face and stormed off with an armload of laundry, leaving in my wake a black cloud of gloom and doom (and clothes). This time, I knew, I would get results.

I was wrong.

When I returned, it was obvious that nothing had been accomplished in my absence. And worse, all my children had apparently deserted their posts! They were nowhere to be seen or heard as I stood amidst the mess and felt my anger beginning to rise. I was still standing there in stunned silence when I heard peels of hysterical laughter coming from the bedroom. That did it—my frustration meter blew. As I marched with building fury toward my AWOL charges, I reviewed my options for the discipline I would mete out to my insubordinate children.

As I stormed into the room, I saw three giggling children hovering over my bed. I had a full head of steam built up and a strong lecture on responsibility ready to go as soon as I had sufficiently chastised them for their disobedience. I was just about to unleash my fury when eight-year-old Joel,



totally oblivious to my frustration, blurted out through his big easy smile, “Come quick, Mom! Joy has found her foot and she’s trying to stick it in her mouth to eat it!”

I looked over to the bed and saw what all the commotion was about. My three precious children had been captivated by a happy little baby who had just discovered her foot. My heart instinctively knew that this was not a time for judgment but, rather, for joy. It was a moment to celebrate and participate. I quickly made the adjustment—Sergeant Mom made a hasty retreat and gentle Mommy was back. Then, joining with my mirthful mess makers, we laughed out loud together on the bed at the amazing talent of our newest family member, providentially named Joy.



**A** few years earlier, harshness would have won out over happiness. I probably would have lost my temper, raised my voice, and made everyone generally miserable. Several years ago at Christmas, I had planned a special time to bake cookies with the kids. I expected it this to be a precious Christmas memory. I also expected to get twelve dozen cookies made for Christmas plates. I had melted some chocolate for making candy-coated pretzels and turned away to work on a batch of cookies in the oven. When I turned back around to see how the kids were doing, I reeled at the sight of three-year-old Nathan using the melted chocolate as finger paint. Chocolatey goodness covered his hands, face, hair, and clothes, not to mention the cabinets and floor. Unfortunately, in my anger I made a bigger mess of the situation and missed the joy of that moment. But time and experience have since tempered my temper. Today, I would get a big laugh out of my chocolate-covered child and take a few snapshots. I would choose joy.

I am more convinced than ever that even in the midst of the mundane, burdensome, and oftentimes frustrating tasks of life allotted to me as a mother, God wants me to find his joy. He wants every single day of my life to be a celebration of his blessings, whether large or small. He wants me to celebrate life—the life he has given me.

But what does it mean to “celebrate” life? Does it mean that I let my house be a wreck so I can enjoy my children, or that I never entertain negative thoughts and attitudes, or that I never discipline my children? Does it mean



that I simply overlook the myriad difficulties that inevitably spoil the best days, or that I ignore the burdens I carry as a stay-at-home mom, or that I close my eyes to intractable sins that won't go away?

Of course not! The joy-filled life is not found by diminishing my God-given responsibilities as a woman, wife, and mother, nor can I find joy merely by refusing to face the hard realities of life in a fallen world. There is a tension that God is asking me to acknowledge and accept—the tension between ideals and realities. True joy is found by living somewhere between the ideal life and daily realities. That is where Jesus meets me, where his Holy Spirit empowers, and where I learn how to live the Christian life with supernatural joy.

To celebrate life is simply a choice. Every day, God extends his hand to offer me the gift of another day to live. I have the choice to take that gift and turn it into 24 hours of real life in Christ, or just let it become another 24 hours endured in a broken world. If I choose to accept it—to transform those minutes and hours into life lived for and with my Savior—I have the opportunity to see God at work, enjoy his presence, wonder at his creation, appreciate the expressions of his beauty and love, and touch the minds and hearts of my children with his reality. That's certainly what I desire, but it is a choice I have to make daily.

“But Sally,” you may be saying, “I’m a homeschooling mom. Between the responsibilities, difficulties, and demands on my time, just when am I supposed to celebrate life? I consider it a victory just to make it through the day!” Believe me, I share your feelings, but I am also confident that the homeschooling lifestyle is your best opportunity for celebrating life as God meant it to be. If you will make the choice, motherhood can become a journey of joy!

I certainly don't claim to have achieved a perfect record of choosing to celebrate, but I am getting better at it every day. Let me share with you two simple, biblical principles that help me to make the daily choice to live a joyful life.

### *Choose to be thankful*

There is no Scripture I know of where God says it is okay to grumble, pout, or complain. I sure would like to find one, but it's not there. (I'm still looking!) There are, however, plenty of verses where God tells us to be thankful. It's hard to miss Paul's meaning when he tells believers in the Thessalonian church to



“be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

When I’m facing difficult circumstances, that can be a very annoying verse. “You mean,” I cry out to God, “I should be thankful for my daughter’s asthma? For my washing machine that overflowed fifteen times last year on my new linoleum? For our financial struggles? For that difficult relationship that never goes away?”

And God replies in my spirit, *Yes, that is exactly what I mean. Because when you are thankful, you are acknowledging my sovereign control over ALL the circumstances of your life, whether good or bad.*

That may not be what my emotions want to hear, but if I consider the alternatives to being thankful, I can readily see God’s point. When I pout instead of being joyful, grumble instead of praying, or complain instead of giving thanks, I am in effect telling God that he is mishandling my life and I don’t care for the way he’s doing his job. At that point, I have ceased to put my faith in my sovereign Lord, choosing instead to put my faith in my circumstances. In other words, I am telling God—and myself—that if and when my circumstances change, then and *only* then can I be happy. Until then, I have nothing to be thankful for. And that, according to Paul, is when I step outside of God’s will.

My sinful heart might try to counter that it is the lousy circumstances that have forced me to wander outside of God’s will, but that’s just rationalization; it is my *response* to my circumstances that moved me out of God’s will. That is why God admonishes me to be joyful and to give thanks *in all circumstances*. When I do that, no matter how bad the situation, I am acknowledging that he is in control. It is an act of faith. I can choose, by faith, to see God’s hand within any and every circumstance of my life.

Job’s testimony comes to mind here. When tested to the limits with the loss of everything he owned or held dear, his wife tested him even further by cajoling him to blame God for his miseries. Job, however, replied, “Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?” He was right in the middle of God’s will, not blaming his circumstances or cursing God, but rather placing his faith in his trustworthy Maker.

I am by nature strong-willed and idealistic, and for many years I was in the habit of telling God how I thought he should run my life. I was willing to live by faith and to do whatever was necessary to do his will, yet God didn’t seem willing to reciprocate by changing my negative circumstances



and relationships according to my will! There was a period of twelve years in our marriage when difficult circumstances were almost as a way of life. Even though it was also a time of wonderful ministry and much fruitful work, I found myself too often complaining to God about the difficulties, pleading with him to change our circumstances.

Now, as I look back over those years, I can see that I wasted a lot of time asking God to change the very circumstances he wanted to use to prepare me for the ministry we're now enjoying. How thankful I am that I did not get my own way; but how I wish even more that I had not wasted so much precious time trying to! Much joy was missed during those years because I chose not to be thankful.

Life is not that much different now, but I am different.

We still have great blessings mixed with great difficulties, but I am learning, like Job, how to be thankful for both. Instead of resisting the life God has given me, I can choose to relax and release the stress of a busy life through a spirit of thankfulness, because I know that God is in control. And in making that choice, I am discovering the joy that God has always wanted for me.

And for that I can truly say, "Thank you, Lord!"

### *Learn to be content*

Contentedness has never been one of the defining character qualities of American life. In fact, we (and our children) are constantly deluged with the message that it is good to want more than you have, that more things, experiences, or abilities will make you happier and more fulfilled. Though it is never said quite so bluntly, the American way of life depends in large measure on those who willingly and regularly break the tenth commandment by coveting their neighbor's possessions. It's no wonder that we're a bit uncomfortable when we start talking about being content with what we have.

As rugged individualists, Americans don't want to hear that living in a fallen world means that life will never be as perfect as we want it to be. Yet that is part of living between the ideals and realities. I have come to understand, after much struggle, that I will spend the better part of my life adjusting my expectations to life's limitations rather than having my expectations fulfilled. Yet this is the first step on the road to finding true contentedness—learning to accept those limitations as a normal part of life. Happiness is not found in getting what I want, but rather in giving up my expectations of getting what I want.



Paul said, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:11). His honest testimony is a forceful reminder to me that contentedness is never a gift or a given, but rather it is a learned condition. It is a fruit of the Spirit’s work in my life as I live each day by faith, walking in his power. It isn’t some kind of supernatural salve that I can ask God to apply to my heart but, rather, a *learned* condition of depending on God. As Paul goes on to say, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13).

If I learn to be content, joy will naturally follow. Like thankfulness, though, I have to *choose* to be content before I can know joy. It is an act of faith.

As I share with and counsel other homeschooling mothers, contentedness seems to be an illusive ideal. For many it seems there is always something out there, just beyond their grasp, that they cannot have but which they believe will fulfill them and make them happy if they could somehow get their hands on it. But they can’t, and their failure to do so leaves them feeling anxious, empty, and depleted. And so they live in the shadow of unfulfilled expectations of how their lives could or should be.

As I have sought the input of seasoned homeschooling mothers on this issue, their response has been consistent: The only way to make it in this homeschooling life is to reach for God instead of reaching for happiness. Contrary to what advertisers drill into us thousands of times each week, striving harder for contentment will not make you happy or content. The only way to attain true contentment is to rest in God and depend upon his grace.

It is a spiritual issue, not a practical one. Contentedness will not come from being more organized, sleeping longer, being a better wife, keeping a nicer home, using higher-quality materials, taking more time for yourself, or whatever it is you think might help. Contentedness is learned by accepting life each day as God gives it to you, and adjusting your expectations to life’s limitations.

If it is God’s will for me to homeschool, then he is not asking me to do more than I am able (see 1 Corinthians 10:13), and he is not withholding from me anything that I truly need (see Philippians 4:19). If I choose to, I can learn to be content with the life that God has given to me, whether I have a little or a lot to live it with. What keeps me from being content is not what God is or isn’t supplying; the real problem is that I, Sally, refuse to adjust my expectations—I want more than I can have, ask for more than I need, strive for more than I can do, and expect more than God has promised.



Once I thought I had to have it all together—life, home, schooling, marriage, family—to be a good homeschooling mother. In fact, I was certain I would be happier if I did. Now I know better. I know the limitations. I know that my house will be messier if it is populated round the clock by little people. I know that no matter how tightly I control the schedule my schooling will still be interrupted from time to time. I know that my less-than-perfect children will not always respond to my less-than-perfect discipline and instruction. I know that we will do well in some areas and that we won't do well in others. I know that I will not always be the perfect wife and Clay will not always be the perfect husband. I know that we cannot afford the kind of house or car or vacations or luxuries or even some simple pleasures that I would like.

But I also know that it's okay.

These are limitations I must live with. The more I resist them, the less contented I will be. But the more I learn to accept these limitations, and live within them, the more contented I will become. It's that simple.



**I**t all comes down to this: Joy is the result of the choices that you make. If you are choosing to be thankful and learning to be content, then you are opening your heart to joy. Joy is not a supernatural feeling that God pours on you from heaven but a gift of the Holy Spirit that is released by faith (see Galatians 5:22). You don't have to wait for God to give you joy. You simply need to get your self out of the way and let the Spirit fill your heart and mind with his truth. That is exactly what you are doing when you choose to thank God and be content in all circumstances. You are exercising faith, and that faith releases the joy of the Spirit into your life. Only through the Holy Spirit can you truly celebrate life and find the joy God wants you to know.

Granted, this is not always *easy* with so many worries and responsibilities getting in the way of joy; but it is always *possible*. I will always have a picture in my mind of me and my children, together on the bed, giggling at a little 18-pound bundle of Joy eating her foot. But that memorable moment of celebration started with a choice—the decision that making memories with my children is more important than the messes they've already made.

I have no assurance that I'll ever be given another sweet baby to enjoy.



My children will never again be just the way they are now. I don't know if we'll all be here together next Christmas or even next week. But I do know that we are a family now, today, this moment, and I can celebrate each minute as it unfolds. It's my choice.

My joy isn't dependent on keeping my house as orderly as I would like, or on obtaining possessions to put in it, or on getting all the schooling done, or accomplishing anything else on my To Do list. My joy is dependent on my relationship with my Lord and our celebrating together this life he has given me.

So make the choice to celebrate life with your family. It is so easy to think that life consists of the assorted responsibilities, tasks, and crises that fill up the hours of each homeschooling day. But it doesn't. The parts of life that matter most are the unexpected moments and memories that happen each day—the ones that won't be forgotten.

Choose to be thankful, and learn to be content.

You'll find the joy that God wants you to know.



*Spring - Season of Renewal*

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## *Thoughts on the Living Word*

God never assures us that the Christian life will be easy. Quite the opposite—he seems to go out of his way to let us know it will be difficult. On the other hand, the Scriptures are filled with promises and expressions of the joy that is ours as believers. That seeming paradox is nowhere better expressed than in our Lord “who for the joy set before him endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2). Christianity does not promise me an easier life, but it does give me a better way to live. It does not make me a happier person, but it gives me a reason to be joyful. The joy of the Lord—born of the hope of eternal glory—should be the mark of every true believer.

### *Ecclesiastes 3:9–15*

The writer of Ecclesiastes puts all of life into perspective in this passage. If the things of this world are beautiful, yet we have eternity written on our hearts, how will that affect our view of life? Why has God given us good things to enjoy in this life if they are only temporal? What will “endure forever” from the life God wants us to enjoy? What will endure forever from your family?

### *Philippians 4:10–13*

Paul, thankful for the Philippians’ gift, explains that he is content whatever his situation. What circumstances is God using in your life to help you learn to be content? Do you know that you would be content whether you were in need or had plenty? How are you modeling to your children that you “can do everything through him who gives [you] strength”?

### *1 Thessalonians 5:16–18*

What most often keeps you from experiencing joy? What would you need to do to be one who prays “continually”? What are some of the things in your life for which God wants you to give thanks, even though they are difficult? Do you believe you can do God’s will according to this verse? Why or why not?



### *Nehemiah 8:1–12*

When Ezra the priest read God's Word to the Jews, who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile, the people wept with sadness. How did Nehemiah, the governor, encourage them? If you were grieving, how would his words encourage you? How can rejoicing in God give you strength in the midst of life's difficulties?

### *Thoughts on Living the Word*

When I start to feel down or depressed, I need to have the Word of God where I can see it, like on a 3x5 card on the refrigerator. Sometimes a quick reading of a verse such as 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 is all I need to get back on track spiritually. I find that particular verse is also an easy one to memorize and keep at the front of my mind. ❖ Occasionally I will use my quiet time to write down all that I am thankful for and especially for the things I appreciate about Clay and the children. This helps me to focus on the positive things in my life. Or I may write down whatever is keeping me from having the joy of the Lord in my life, and then I look for specific changes I can make. ❖ As a proactive way to keep the joy in my life, I'll plan at least one family activity each week that I know will be enjoyable for everyone. It's kind of a celebration of family—a walk in the park, family tea time or hot chocolate by the fire, a bike ride on a nature trail, or a special story time.

### *My Life*

*Personal application:* Make a time to record in your spiritual journal all the things for which you are most thankful, not only for what you have, but also for what you don't have. Use the list each day this week in a quiet time to thank God for your blessings.

*Family application:* Plan a fun family event this week. Declare it to be a special time of celebration for something out of the norm—Third Child Awareness Week, Pet Night, Ice Cream Appreciation Day. It can be serious or silly, but build it up all through the week.

