



CHOOSING JOY

WHEN THE HOLIDAYS ARE HARD

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thechoosejoybook.com

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when you can't find your holiday spirit

Do you have your Christmas tree up yet? Are your halls all decked?

I don't—and mine are not. I also haven't flipped over to the radio station playing non-stop Christmas music since it began a couple weeks ago, and I've only bought two presents.

Christmas craft tutorials seem to make me twitchy this year, and a conversation about finding a date for my favorite family gathering of the year left me in tears.

It seems I've lost my holiday spirit.

I know it's the most wonderful time of the year. I know! But while I'm not quite up to Grinch status yet, I'm definitely not feeling holly or jolly about the upcoming festivities I normally look forward to each December.

The holidays can be hard. Sometimes our circumstances color how we handle special days and everyday days and all the days in between. But sometimes, for no reason at all, it might just be hard to find your holiday spirit. And when that happens, *what do you do?*

Well, I'm still working through this, searching for a spark of holiday spirit myself. But here are a few things I'll be trying this week.

Cut the clutter.

Don't worry. I'm not suggesting you deep clean the house or alphabetize your spices. No need to start that craziness 'til January, am I right? But it's possible that clearing some space in your life might open up room for Christmas—and, yes, for Christ.

I know for me, a messy dining room table (and, you all, it is almost ALWAYS a mess) makes it much harder for me to be productive. I see the mess and I get overwhelmed and I don't know where to start with anything and, well, nothing gets done.

The same is true in just about every area of my life. If I have too much still-haven't-dealt-with-it junk in my heart, I can't find time to pray. And even if I do, I find that time empty and lacking any real connection with God.

So whether it's physical clutter (Yes, FINE, it's time for me to finally organize my garage!), calendar clutter (We RSVP'd to HOW MANY Christmas parties?!), or heart clutter, take a few minutes to cut it out. Clear a space for peace and joy—and to receive the Gift of this season.

Look at the world through a child's eyes.

Whether you have children of your own or not, *you were once a child yourself*. So think back: what did you love doing at Christmas when you were a kid? Frosting cookies? (EATING cookies?) Sitting on Santa's lap? Christmas caroling? Wrapping gifts in the comics section of the newspaper? Watching the cartoon Christmas specials?

Whatever it was, do it. Do it now—or as soon as you can. Don't overanalyze it or mock it. Just travel back in time for a moment and let your inner child come out.

For me, this is watching the Claymation Christmas Special. The one with the California Raisins. We watch it every year at my parents' house; it's our "thing." But this year, I'm going to borrow my brother's copy of the strange, silly show and watch it early. It's hard not to get into the holiday spirit when the jazzy camels made of clay are singing "We Three Kings."

Reminisce about past holidays.

Remember that Christmas we forgot to turn the oven on? Or we got snowed in? Or we went to that ugly sweater party or played ten rounds of White Elephant/Yankee Swap? Or what about the Christmas karaoke? Or the time we forgot to look in our stockings?

While we all have a story of holiday disaster or dysfunction, we also probably each have at least one story that brings a smile to our face. Thinking back to those good ole' days—or even just that great moment in the midst of some Christmas chaos—is sure to warm our hearts and turn the tide of holiday love.

Pick one thing.

Look, I'm not going to say, "Fake it until you make it." That's obviously, well, fake. But rather than avoiding all celebrations because we just don't FEEL LIKE IT . . . what if we pick just one thing and give it a try? Maybe we don't listen to Christmas music 'round the clock, but could we play one CD one time? It's okay to skip a year of trimming the tree; but how about a tabletop evergreen or even a Christmas scented candle in the room?

Just pick one thing. I'm going to start with hanging some greenery above my dining room windows. (Well. After I declutter that table a bit . . .)

Remember where it all started.

The truth is that Christmas isn't about the holiday hoopla anyway. The music and the gifts and the decorations are nice, sure. But the reason for the season? It's Jesus. Just Jesus. And Just Jesus? IS ENOUGH. If celebrating in style isn't your thing this year, that's okay. If you're feeling the pull of a quieter season, a more peaceful time of reflection— THAT'S OKAY.

Mary and Joseph didn't have a Christmas tree, and the shepherds wouldn't have known how to frost a candy cane-shaped cookie if the angels had spelled it out for them. Their focus was right where it was meant to be, right where ours is meant to be: on Jesus. The Messiah. The One who started it all, the One where it all started. And His Spirit is really the only one we need.

WHAT DOES THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT LOOK LIKE FOR YOU THIS YEAR?



WHEN IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS

The light shines in the darkness, **and the darkness can never extinguish it.**

(John 1:5)

It's not Christmas until...

- ...we put up the tree.
- ...Bobby comes home.
- ...I hear O Holy Night.
- ...we light the Advent candles.
- ...it snows.
- ...we watch White Christmas.
- ...I bake cookies.
- ...we volunteer at the shelter.
- ...we get our family photos back.
- ...we read Luke 2.

Sometimes the holidays hurt. Coming at the end of a hard year – one where we've lost loved ones or jobs or even a bit of our faith – the days and weeks when we're expected to wear shiny smiles and holler jolly greetings at everyone we see can feel overwhelming and even depressing.

We think back to Christmases past, recalling warm fires and hot cocoa, meaningful gifts and inspiring Scripture readings, cheerful and thankful children, family members cooking and crafting and playing Scrabble together. We remember how good the holidays can be (conveniently forgetting the hard parts that happen Every. Single. Year.) and the regret buries deep in our hearts.

We feel pre-emptively sad, because *It just won't feel like Christmas this year.*

Whatever loss or challenge we're facing or remembering when things aren't exactly as they were before becomes a catalyst to resent this year's calendar full of activities and events and expectations.

"This year just won't be the same," we say.

And some years aren't. Truly, no two holidays can be exactly the same – no matter how dedicated we are to tradition and favorite foods and white elephant gag gifts that reappear every year. Circumstances change, lives change, PEOPLE CHANGE.

It can be hard. I would never claim that celebrating Christmas in light of a loss is easy or simply a matter of *Get over it* or *Fake it 'til you make it*.

Sometimes the holiday season can make us sad – and I think that's okay and normal and a part of living life.

But Christmas itself? The day we celebrate the birth of our Savior? Could it be possible to reclaim that day, that remembrance, that epic birthday party *no matter what our circumstances are this year?*

Can we separate the holiday chaos from our holy celebration? Can we turn our focus from our Advent to-do lists to our Mighty God and Wonderful Counselor, our Emmanuel?

After all, that first Christmas didn't have Advent candles or a decked-out tree. Joseph and Mary didn't snap a family photo in matching robes or sit Baby Jesus and the Wise Men down for hot cocoa and the Peanuts special.

And yet they celebrated Christmas.

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others —the armies of heaven— praising God and saying, "Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:13-14)

It's not wrong to grieve, to miss those who aren't with us, to reminisce about sweet experiences and special days gone by. **But let's not get so bogged down in our feelings this year that we miss out on the JOY.** Because when God promised to be with the brokenhearted and crushed in spirit, He wasn't simply giving our feelings and needs lip service.

No, He was telling us that He would send His Son, the Jesus who was born into this world, the One we celebrate each year, no matter what kind of year it's been. He was telling us that we aren't alone, on our happiest days or our hardest ones. He was promising His "Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love" (as the *Jesus Storybook Bible* puts it) in the person of Jesus Christ.

And if that's not a reason to celebrate – snow or not, with or without cookies, no matter how deeply we grieve – I don't know what is.

WHAT DO YOU NEED FOR THE SEASON TO "FEEL" LIKE CHRISTMAS?



WHEN THE HOLIDAYS MAKE YOU SAD

When I was in college, a friend introduced me to the movie, *Home for the Holidays*. It stars Holly Hunter and Robert Downey, Jr., and it's a fantastic film about the special brand of family crazy that comes out around the holidays.

For a group of half-adult, half-child college students preparing to go home for a few days, it was the perfect way to simultaneously brace ourselves and acknowledge that, dysfunctional and stressful as our own families may be, *at least they weren't like the one we watched in that movie.*

Not exactly like it, anyway.

It's funny. I'd never heard of that movie before college, and I certainly don't see it making any lists of "Best Holiday Movies." I mean, it's no Elf or White Christmas. But when the weather turns cold and cans of cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie filling move to the endcaps at the grocery store, **I always think of that movie.**

This movie – and the story behind it – doesn't come to mind every November because my family resembles the one Holly Hunter's character has to face. (Well, not completely.) No, I always go back to those college memories because one of my friends who introduced me to the movie and its rightful place in my holiday prep routine *hasn't spoken to me in about a decade.*

The story of how our friendship died is complicated and not one I'll go into detail about here. The details really don't matter, though. **The point is that I lost one of my very**

best friends, and it broke my heart – and the days leading up to Thanksgiving remind me of that more than any other time of the year.

I bet you have people you miss all year long – *but especially during the holidays* – too.

Sometimes memories intrude on celebrations, making this season hard to handle.

The empty chair sticks out more. Or sits alone in the corner.

The room full of people feels quieter. Or louder.

The favorite dish has plenty left over. Or the favorite dish isn't made this year.

The gifts go unopened. Or unwrapped. Or un-bought.

It's hard to remember something to be thankful for.

Smiles look a little shaky. And tears are the uninvited guest that won't leave.

Divorce. Dysfunction. Death. All of these things (and more) affect our families, our lives, our hearts. **And though they hurt all year long, day in and day out, the holidays seem to bring out the pain like no other time can.** On a day – or days – when we're supposed to be all smiles and good cheer, our hearts crack under the pressure and the remembering and the missing.

I know. I've been there in the "it's still so fresh, we can't think about anything else, how can we possibly put on a good face this year" seasons. And I'm there every year when memories of losses from long ago and not so long ago join together to wage war on our determination to forge on and focus on the reason for the season.

Family and friends we no longer speak to – or who no longer speak to us.

Family and friends who died much too soon. (*It's always too soon.*)

Family and friends who aren't invited – or don't show up.

Family and friends who moved away.

Jobs that were taken away.

Children who are sick.

Anyone who is sick.

We try so hard to fight for our joy, don't we? We print out place cards and try the new recipe. We dress up our kids and bundle up for the long drive. We take photos and send cards and smile and chat and catch up and promise to call more often.

But underneath, many of us still carry wounds ripped open by the reminders of relationships and situations that are no longer. And it hurts. And it's hard. *And we're not sure what to do with it all.*

I'm not advocating that we stay in our pajamas, curl up with a turkey leg and a box of tissues, and decline all invitations in favor of a Pity Party for One. I'm not suggesting we ignore the blessings we have in front of us and spend our days off flipping through our photo albums and memories searching for clues about when it all went wrong.

No. I'm simply offering an acknowledgement – that the pain is real; a reassurance – that you can find peace and joy anyway; an understanding smile – and a hug that's totally not awkward even if we've never met.

Sometimes the holidays make us sad. They make us happy, too – and it's okay to feel both. But the sadness might still be there. And I believe that's okay.

That sadness colors how we see what's in front of us today – the family who can't wait to see us across the table, the friends who don't care if your pumpkin brownie trifle gets

soggy, the children whose eyes light up with wonder and innocence – either the kind that's truly not seen pain yet or the kind that can forget about it when faced with jingle bells and wishbones and parade floats made of flowers.

But while it can try its best to turn those beautiful gifts into bitter reminders of what's missing, **the sadness can't compete when we remember that today is full.** Full of pain, yes – *sometimes*. But also full of blessings and joy and things both big and small that God has given us to remind us of His love and faithfulness. Yes, even when the flip side is covered in reasons to crawl under the blanket with a bowl of mashed potatoes.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted;

He rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

(Psalm 34:18)

If the holidays are making you sad this year – perhaps the same as every year or maybe more than you ever imagined possible – I pray that you can close your eyes and feel it for a moment. It's okay to do that. Really. **But then open them to the good that is still around you.**

And, most importantly, remember that the Lord is close. And He will rescue us from the sadness. Not with false cheer or denial or caroling or casseroles, but with the peace that passes all understanding and His joy that can be our strength.

DO THE HOLIDAYS EVER MAKE YOU SAD? HOW DO YOU COPE?



WHEN YOUR "BEST OF" LIST COMES UP EMPTY

I love lists. I really do. As a matter of fact, I'm itching to make a grocery list right now. Then I want to make another to-do list, because the one I wrote two days ago is missing several things – some I've already done, but writing them down just to cross them off makes sense to me.

So when the end of the year rolls around and every media outlet in the world begins compiling year-end and best-of lists, *I am in my nerdy, happy place*. Two years ago I took the opportunity of this trend to share some of my own best-of lists, sharing the best blog posts I'd read that year, the best blog posts I'd written (in my humble opinion, of course) that year, my favorite recipes from the year, and [of course] my favorite TV shows and movies from the year.

It was fun and I assumed I'd make it an annual practice. **But some years don't have much in the "best of" category.**

In the past few weeks I've shared my thoughts about how, sometimes, the holidays aren't the most wonderful time of the year. These thoughts have been heavy on my mind and heart not because the past year was rough. Even though the last twelve months brought frustrating situations and tough decisions, all of those challenges were temporary and ended in so much gratitude and growth that I can't possibly complain.

I could easily come up with a few "best of" lists for this year – *and I might still do that*. **But last year? Last year was hard in ways I never could have imagined and do not ever want to relive.** As I crawled to the finish line last December, the only thing I was

truly thankful for was the end of that season. I couldn't look back, I didn't feel like reflecting, and even if pressed I might not have come up with a single "best" for the entire previous twelve months.

In one year my brother-in-law had died in a motorcycle accident, my husband and I had spent months in counseling fighting for our marriage, and my daughter had exhibited horrible behavior issues that we simply didn't know how to deal with. Looking at that little list in black and white, a year removed, it doesn't seem all that bad. **BUT IT WAS.**

So what do we do when our year's best-of list comes up empty?

1. Start by keeping it in perspective. This season won't last forever. The calendar – and the cycle of life's ups and downs – will turn over eventually. His mercies truly ARE fresh every morning, every New Year's Day, every time we turn to Him.

2. Count your blessings – small as they may be. Keeping a gratitude journal or listing your 1,000 gifts may seem insincere or even impossible during difficult times. But I truly believe God takes our tiny offerings of gratitude and increases them until our hearts are softened and our perspectives are changed in a way we simply can't do with closed hands.

3. Give yourself permission to grieve. Some things are really, really hard to live through. Some challenges seem never-ending or unfair or Just Too Much. It's okay to feel that sadness. God is close to the brokenhearted – which means He knows full and well that we will have times of grief where this life is too much to bear. Lean into it for a time, and lean into Him. It's okay to be sad for a while; He can take it better than we can when we try to hold it in and carry it alone.

4. Cling to hope and look forward to next year. Even if you can't celebrate the holidays with the spirit you normally do . . . even if Christmas carols and trees full of ornaments and the perfect gift beautifully wrapped simply remind you of what you're missing this year . . . even if your only resolution for next year is to have a better year because this one stunk . . . remember Hope.

The world was dark when Jesus came that first Christmas – just like it may be dark this Christmas. He came to offer hope, because He IS Hope. So even when the holidays are hard, remember you have Hope.

Those are the things I wish I'd known to do a year ago. Because sure enough, this calendar year did bring a fresh outlook and a renewed heart. I know difficult years will happen again, but this most recent season has been one full of blessings both small and large. And receiving that after a time full of so much pain makes this year's best-of list even sweeter. I'm thankful, both for the relief from last year's challenges and the reminder that when hard times come again [because they will], they won't last forever.

If nothing else, THAT is something to put on a best-of list!

WHAT WOULD YOU PUT ON A BEST OF 2015 LIST?



CHOOSING JOY WHEN THE HOLIDAYS ARE HARD

Broken cookies.

Dry turkey.

Sold-out stores.

Thoughtless gifts.

The flu.

A blizzard.

Maxed-out credit cards.

A broken heater.

Another holiday with *those* people.

Another holiday alone.

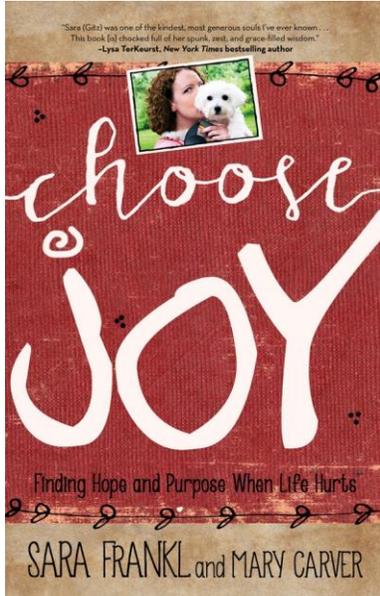
Other various family, *ahem*, issues.

The list of things that can possibly ruin the holidays is long. But you know what? None of these things is the whole story or the final word. We can *choose* to find joy and find meaning in the holidays, no matter how imperfect, overwhelming or hurtful they are.

My prayer for you this year is that you can face the holidays with courage, honesty, and hope. I pray that no matter what season or circumstances you find yourself in, you have the strength to choose joy – in the hard times and the happy ones, in the big moments and the small ones, in the holidays and the everyday.

JOY TO THE WORLD - and JOY TO YOU!

CHOOSE JOY: THE BOOK



If you'd like more inspiration to choose joy, no matter your circumstance, *Choose Joy: Finding Hope & Purpose When Life Hurts* is for you. I'm excited to be the co-author of this book, along with Sara Frankl, that is full of life and lessons that Sara learned through insurmountable challenges and unimaginable pain that eventually resulted in unfathomable hope.

Sara lived with chronic pain as a result of autoimmune disease called ankylosing spondylitis and was eventually confined to her home before dying at 38 years old. If anyone had a reason to focus on the unfairness of life, it was her. Yet Sara accomplished something few can, especially those enduring intense pain: **she chose joy.**

Choose Joy: Finding Hope & Purpose When Life Hurts is a must-have for anyone searching for meaning and beauty in a world full of tragedy. Sara's words breathe with vitality and life, and her stories will inspire smiles, tears, and the desire to choose joy. My hope is that Sara's story will encourage you to choose serving others over lamenting their own circumstances, to be grateful for their blessings no matter what hardships they face, and to remember they can choose joy in every situation life throws at them.

LEARN MORE (and order your copy) AT THECHOOSEJOYBOOK.COM.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Carver is a writer, speaker, and recovering perfectionist. She lives for good books, spicy queso, and television marathons, but she lives because of God's grace. Mary and her husband live in Kansas City with their two daughters.

Mary writes about her imperfect life with humor and honesty, encouraging women to give up on perfect and get on with life, at GivingUpOnPerfect.com. She is the co-author of *Choose Joy: Finding Hope & Purpose When Life Hurts*, and she is a regular contributor to [\(in\)courage.me](http://(in)courage.me), MomAdvice.com, and MothersofDaughters.com.