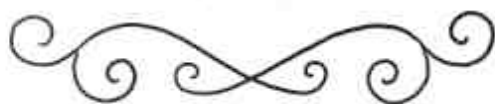




**TAKE HOLD
OF THE
FAITH
YOU
LONG
FOR**



LET GO, MOVE FORWARD,
LIVE BOLD

SHARON JAYNES



BakerBooks

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

Sharon Jaynes, *Take Hold of the Faith You Long For*
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Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jaynes, Sharon, author.

Title: Take hold of the faith you long for : let go, move forward, live bold / Sharon Jaynes.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015050531 | ISBN 9780801018855 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian women—Religious life.

Classification: LCC BV4527 .J396 2016 | DDC 248.8/43—dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015050531>

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Italics in quoted Scripture reflect the author's emphasis.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To my mom,
Louise Anderson Edwards.
In her last days, she reminded me once again,
“It’s not how you start; it’s how you finish.”
She finished well.
1932–2014



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one



Stuck on a Feelin’

I was alone, or at least I felt that way. Women huddled in happy clusters chatting about first one thing and then another. Some propped babies on their hips. Others clutched Bibles in their hands. Most wore smiles on their faces. I wore one too. But it wasn't a reflection of what was in my heart. The upturned lips were simply the camouflage I wore to blend in—to avoid being found out. What I really wanted to do was run and hide. On the outside I was a well-put-together church mom with trendy shoes and snappy jeans, but on the inside I was a little girl cowering in the far recesses of the playground hoping no one would notice my reluctance to join in.

What's wrong with me? I wondered. Why don't I feel the joy these other women feel? What holds me back from experiencing the confidence and assurance they seem to experience? Why do they seem so happy? Where is that abundant life Jesus talked about? If I am a new creation like the Bible says, why don't I feel like one? Why do I continue to act like the same old me, struggle with the same negative emotions, and wrestle with the same old sins? Why do I feel like I'm wandering around in a maze trying to find a way out of these feelings of inadequacy?

The problem was, I was stuck. Yes, I had professed Jesus as my Lord and Savior. I had done that. I knew Christ had set me free, but honestly, I couldn't tell you exactly what He had set me free from. He had set me free from the penalty of sin and spending eternity in hell. I got that. But I had a niggling feeling that was not what Jesus meant when He said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). I had a hunch He meant something more than heaven when He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). That sounded earthy to me.

My early years in the faith were filled with wonder, expectancy, and downright giddiness. But somewhere along the line, I had settled into being a good church girl—a Bible-study mom who moved into cul-de-sac Christianity, pitched my lawn chair under a shade tree, and waved at other well-mannered believers doing the same. Year after year I hoped, *Maybe this will be the Bible study that will make it all better*. And the truth is, I didn't even know what the "it" was.

What do you do when your walk becomes a crawl? When you feel like you are a disappointment to yourself and to God? When spiritual chronic fatigue leaves you wondering if it's all worth it? When you feel stuck between the Red Sea and the Promised Land—saved from slavery but never quite making it to the land of milk and honey? What do you do when you realize your once-passionate faith has morphed into the safe confines of a predictable, domesticated belief system, far away from "Go ye therefore" and "Greater things than these"?

Sometimes the gap between the faith we long for and the faith we experience seems vast, beyond bridging. We stand on the east ledge of the great expanse, thinking the west rim is out of reach or possibly not worth the effort. We think going from where we are to where we want to be is impossible, implausible, or unrealistic, so we pull up a lounge chair in the land of in-between and settle in.

Content, but not really. Longing, but not quite enough. Satisfied, but not completely. We settle for reading about the adventures of others and secretly wonder if they are on the up-and-up. We read about the bold faith of others and think, *Good for them*. We make peace with passivity because we falsely believe God would never want to use the likes of us anyway.

I'd hazard a guess that most believers don't really want to venture out of the land of in-between. Given the choice, they wouldn't go back to the Egypt of their life before Christ, but at the same time, they don't really want to get their shoes messy and step into the unknown, unabridged faith of Promised Land living. Many settle for a milquetoast faith that listens through the walls to the music from a party going on in the next room. So what if they can't catch all the words? They get the gist of the melody, and they're okay with that. They aren't particularly motivated to move beyond weekend visits with God, as if they're a kid whose parents have shared custody. They're satisfied circling in the wilderness; after all, it's certainly better than Egypt. They're satisfied with a bit of manna and a splash of water every now and then. *There is* heaven to come. Yes, at least there is that. And that's enough.

But I'm not that person. I'm hoping you're not either.

How do we move beyond the safe confines of cul-de-sac Christianity and into the mountain-moving, giant-slaying, lame-man-leaping, adventurous faith? How do we stop circling in the wilderness of unbelief and make our way into the Promised Land of peace, purpose, and a passionate faith? How do we refuse to be lulled into the ridiculous idea that God is a safe, simple, grandfatherly gentleman who kisses babies and helps us find the closest parking space at the mall and matching towels at a clearance sale? How do we consistently access the power of God's promises and boldly believe the truth? How do we stop being held hostage by feelings of inferiority, insecurity, and inadequacy and take hold of the confidence and courage to live bold and do all God has

planned for us to do and be all God has created us to be? How do we move beyond *knowing* the truth to actually *believing* it? These are some of the questions we will tackle in the pages ahead, finding answers that turn stumbling blocks into stepping-stones that lead to “life to the full.”

We can get stuck in the land of in-between in many ways and for many reasons, and to move beyond them we must be brave enough to let go and take hold. Let go of the lies that hold us hostage and take hold of the truths that set us free. Let go of festering offenses and take hold of forgiving grace. Let go of shame-filled ponderings and take hold of grace-filled pardon. Let go of weighty worry and take hold of total trust. Let go of the preoccupation with self-doubt and take hold of the power-filled promises of God. Let go of comparing ourselves to others and take hold of our uniqueness fashioned by God. Let go of ungrateful grumbling and take hold of unceasing praise. Let go of paralyzing doubt and take hold of fleet-footed faith that’s ready to dance to the daring rhythm of God’s drum.

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). He wasn’t simply speaking of the eternal life we receive when we leave this earth but the fullness and freedom we can experience in the here and now when we take hold of all He has taken hold of for us.

The Greatest Show on Earth

Have you ever watched a circus performer on a flying trapeze? A short horizontal bar suspended by ropes or straps dangles high above the crowd. The aerialist grabs the trapeze bar, jumps off a high platform, and swings through the air. She swings out once, swings back above the platform, and swings out again. The fun begins for those below during the peak of the third swing. The

performer releases the bar midair and grabs hold of another bar or the hands of a second performer hanging from his knees who swings toward her.

Once she grabs hold, the crowd remembers to breathe. Somersaults, backflips, and triple twists wow the crowd. And each move requires the performer to let go and grab hold—let go of one bar or pair of hands and grab hold of another. Without the faith to do so, the trapeze artist would simply swing back and forth until the pumping momentum gave way to dangling or hang stuck in between two platforms with hands clinging to both bars. Not the greatest show on earth.

Paul wrote to the Philippians, “I press on to *take hold* of that for which Christ Jesus *took hold* of me” (Phil. 3:12). Another version expresses the verse this way: “I press on to lay hold of (grasp) and make my own, that for which Christ Jesus (the Messiah) has laid hold of me and made me His own” (AMPC). When you take hold, grasp, and make your own all of what Jesus has already taken hold of for you, you begin to experience life to the full—the faith you’ve always longed for. If we would *grasp and make our own* what Jesus has already done for us, and what He has deposited in us, our lives would look very different from the tepid faith of the average churchgoer.

It’s not enough to know the promises of God; you’ve got to grab hold with all the firmness of the trapeze artist—release what is behind and take hold of what is ahead. *That* is the greatest show on earth. That is how the greatest faith on earth becomes a reality.

God’s promises are not automatic. We must move from knowing the promise, to believing the promise, to actually taking hold of the promise through obedient action in order to make it a reality in our lives. God told Joshua about the Promised Land, “I will give you every place where you set your foot” (Josh. 1:3). He and the Israelites had to “set their feet” to conquer the land—to take hold of the promise that was theirs for the taking.

God's power, provision, and purposes are for "whosoever will" (Mark 8:34 KJV). Will what? Will let go of all that holds us back from experiencing the abundant life of the adventurous faith and take hold of the truth that makes it so.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, and to you and me, "What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor. 2:9). Another translation says, "What eye has not seen and ear has not heard and has not entered into the heart of man, [all that] God has prepared (made and keeps ready) for those who love Him [who hold Him in affectionate reverence, promptly obeying Him and gratefully recognizing the benefits He has bestowed]" (AMPC).

Every one of those plans God has *prepared, made, and keeps ready* requires us to let go of one thing and take hold of another. It was this truth that gave me the courage and confidence to leave the comfortable land of in-between—to let go of simply being a nice church girl and venture into the purpose God had planned for me all along.

The Truth behind the Pretty Door

Like many children living through the depression in rural North Carolina, my parents graduated from high school and said "I do" at the altar a few weeks later. Ten months passed and they heard their first baby's cry. Five years after my brother was born, I made my grand debut. Of course, I don't remember my arrival, but I understand it was a snowy day in the 1.4-square-mile rural town of Spring Hope, North Carolina.

My family lived in a nice neighborhood, in a ranch-style house with white columns supporting the extended front porch and sixty-foot pine trees forming a shady canopy overhead. Azaleas burst to

life each spring and encircled the perimeter of our home with a palette of fuchsia, pink, and white blossoms. With two kids and a collie named Lassie, our family looked like the typical All-American family. While the house was a Southern picture of tranquility, inside the walls brewed an atmosphere of hostility and fear.

From the very beginning my parents had a tumultuous marriage. I don't remember much about my first five years of life, but I do remember many heated arguments, violent outbursts of anger, and periods of passive-aggressive silence. I am sure there were happy times tucked in the marred pages of my childhood, but the accumulation of dark days overshadowed the bright ones and eventually snuffed out their existence in my memory. What I do remember is hiding in my closet, holding my hands over my ears, and squeezing my eyes shut tight in an effort to block the visual images that accompanied the volatile voices.

My father didn't drink every day, but when he did, a temper that perpetually seethed just below the surface erupted into a rage. It seemed that anger constantly smoldered behind his eyes, and alcohol stoked the fire until it would combust with sudden flames of violence. My parents fought both verbally and physically in my presence, and I saw many things a little child should never see and heard words a little child should never hear. I remember going to bed, pulling the covers up tightly under my chin, and praying that I would hurry up and go to sleep to shut out the noise of my parents fighting. On several occasions, I awoke to broken furniture, my mother's black eye, and a weeping father making promises that it would never happen again. It did.

My father was a self-made man who rose from driving a delivery truck at a lumberyard to becoming part owner and manager of a building supply company. He was a tough cookie, and I was afraid of him. And even though I kept my distance, I longed to have a daddy who loved me like the ones I saw walking with their little girls in the park, kissing their little princesses on the cheek when

they dropped them off at school in the morning, or snapping their photos at special events.

As a child, I always felt I was in the way. While my physical needs were cared for, my heart ached for more. I wasn't sure what that *more* was, but I did know it was not a fancy dress, a new toy, or a shiny trinket.

I never felt pretty enough, smart enough, or talented enough. When I tried to help around the house, it seemed I never did it quite right. I remember my mom throwing up her arms in desperation and shouting a common declaration of parents throughout the ages: "What's wrong with you?" And in my little-girl mind I thought, *I don't know, but something is.*

The strands of inferiority, insecurity, and inadequacy began to weave an invisible yet indelible grid system over my mind. Every thought I had, every comment by others, every social interaction had to filter through that sieve of deficiency before it was interpreted by my little-girl mind. By the time I was twelve years old, that filter was cemented firmly in place. I was a scared and scarred little girl who kept her mouth shut by day and her eyes squeezed closed by night.

But God didn't leave me that way.

But God

Two of my favorite words in the Bible are *but God*. His intervention begins in Genesis 3:9 and continues through the pages of the Bible, throughout the annals of history, and in our lives today.

My "but God" story began when I was twelve years old. I became friends with a cute little redhead in my neighborhood named Wanda Henderson. We had known each other since first grade, but our lifelong friendship truly began in the sixth grade. One thing I loved about Wanda was her family. Her parents loved each other

and seemed to really enjoy each other's company. I was drawn to their love like a starving child to bread.

And while I didn't understand why that family was so different from mine, I knew it had something to do with Jesus. Mrs. Henderson flitted about doing her housework while singing little praise songs to God and buzzed about with a joyful hum. She praised God for the smallest details and seemed to be so happy. But one thing that was a bit odd to me was that she talked *to* Jesus and *about* Jesus as though she knew Him personally.

Amazingly, as messed up as my family was with the alcohol, fighting, and a host of other vices that infested our home, we went to church on Sunday . . . looking good. We heard ear-tickling, non-offensive sermons that were moral enough to make us feel we'd done our American duty but not spiritual enough to convict or transform us in any way. We walked through the massive double doors of the pristine sanctuary and were greeted with smiling folks in their Sunday best. "How are you today?" they'd ask. "Fine, just fine," we'd reply. But we were anything but fine, and I suspect the families with spit-shined children sitting in the pews around us weren't either.

I spent as much time as possible at the Hendersons' home. After a Saturday night sleepover, Mrs. Henderson invited me to go to church with their family. It was there that I witnessed a sea of people who seemed to know Jesus personally. She wasn't the only one! When they said they were "fine," they seemed to mean it. Happy people. Joy-filled people. Men and women who still struggled with life but had a deep hope within. And somewhere along the line, it dawned on me. My family had a religion. This family had a relationship with Jesus. And that made all the difference.

I wanted what they had, and I found every excuse possible to tag along with the Hendersons on Sunday mornings. My mind was a thirsty sponge for Scripture and my heart a well-tilled field for seed. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of a *heavenly Father* who

loved me—who loved me so much that He gave His one and only Son as a sacrifice for me. I soaked in the truth that Jesus willingly died on Calvary’s cross to pay the penalty for my sin so I could live in heaven for all eternity. I marveled at the fact that God loved me, not because I performed well but just because I was His.

I confided in Mrs. Henderson about what was going on in my home. Many nights I ran down to their house when the tension in my home grew volatile or when I was afraid. This woman took me under her wing and shared the love of Jesus with me. It wasn’t that she was making a special effort to love me. It was just who she was. I never felt like I was her pet project or that she had a four-point witnessing plan to get me saved. She was just herself—a redheaded, spunky bundle of joy who oozed Jesus’s love and left the residue of His glory wherever she went. Honestly, looking back at those tumultuous days, I am not sure I would have wanted my daughter to have a relationship with the likes of me. I was headed for trouble, but Mrs. Henderson, without even being aware of what she was doing, headed Satan off at the pass.

One night, when I was fourteen years old, Mrs. Henderson sat me down on her den sofa and asked, “Sharon, are you ready to accept Jesus as your personal Savior and Lord?”

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I answered, “Yes, I am.”

With her guidance, I confessed my sin, acknowledged my need for a Savior, asked Jesus to be my Lord, and received the promise of eternal life. The next day I went home and told my mom what I had done.

At first, my parents were leery of my newfound faith, but my love for the Lord was hard to resist or deny. Three years after I gave my life to Jesus, my mother accepted Jesus as her Savior. Then three years after her decision, through a series of twists and turns that only our heavenly Father could have orchestrated, my earthly father gave his life to Christ. In a matter of six years, God had worked an incredible miracle in my life and my family’s life.

Set Free but Not Living Free

What a great story! The sheer wonder of it stokes my passion for Jesus and gratitude to God every time I tell it. But let's go back to that fourteen-year-old girl who was bound with chains of inferiority, insecurity, and inadequacy—the girl who had a filter of worthlessness over her mind and heart. When I made the decision to believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, did those feelings dissolve like springtime snow? Oh, dear friend, I wish I could tell you they did, but they did not. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know those chains were there. I simply knew something wasn't quite right. I was held hostage by my self-perceived deficiencies and didn't even know it.

After the initial excitement of making a commitment to Christ settled down a bit, I actually felt a little worse about myself. Now I added a new "I'm not good enough" to the list of my inadequacies. *I'm not a good enough Christian*, I decided. *I can't memorize Scripture like other people or pray like other Christians. I keep struggling with the same old insecurities. I know God loves me, but I don't think He likes me very much. Why should He? I don't like me much either.* The problem was, as the song says, I was stuck on a feelin'. I walked through life prodded by my emotions rather than led by the truth.

Through the years, I learned to compensate for my insecurities and self-perceived inadequacies. If you had seen me as a teenager—my achievements and accomplishments—you never would have known that I felt that way about myself. But even though I had the borders of the puzzle in place with the promise of heaven, I felt like I was missing key pieces to complete the picture. From the time I was fourteen until I was in my early thirties, I always felt like there was something wrong with me spiritually. I had an uneasiness—like I had walked into a movie twenty minutes late and was trying to figure out what was going on. I wondered why I struggled to live the victorious Christian life. By my midthirties, I had a wonderful husband, an amazing son, and a happy home life. I attended Bible

studies and even taught a few. But in my heart, I knew something wasn't quite right. I wonder if you've ever felt that way.

Simply put, I was stuck. I was stuck in my spiritual growth, and the harder I spun my wheels, the deeper they sank in the muck and mire of the land of in-between—saved from the slavery of Egypt but never quite making it to the Promised Land. And then God brought another woman into my life to shimmy the plank of truth under my tires and help me get on my way.

God wants to show you truths about *your* true identity, His timeless sufficiency, and your preordained destiny that flesh and blood cannot reveal. He sits by the well waiting for you to show up so He can dip down deep and pour out the affirmations you're thirsting for—affirmations that call you to let go of the hindrances that hold you hostage, to take hold of the promises that set you free, and to live bold with that faith you've always longed for. He's looking for men and women who are not only *willing* but also *hungrily yearning* to step outside of the quiet, settled, predictable faith and into the boldly believing, courageously confident, and miraculously powerful adventurous faith. Who will take hold of what they've already got—of what Jesus has already taken hold of for them.

The Bible tells us, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). As we look at the stories of modern-day men and women who have broken free of the confines of the mediocre faith, we are also going to take the hand of several biblical men and women who have done the same.

Throughout the pages of this book, we're going to join Moses fireside and eavesdrop on his conversation with God by the burning bush. Through Moses's objections to his calling, and God's answers to his doubt, we'll discover several important lessons that will work the truth of Scripture under our stuck faith and get us moving forward in an adventurous, thriving, intimate relationship with Christ.