

YOU

A R E

FREE

**BE WHO YOU
ALREADY ARE**

REBEKAH LYONS

Foreword by **ANN VOSKAMP**



ZONDERVAN

You Are Free

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*To Be
Free*

*Tell the truth and write about freedom
and fight for it, however you can,
and you will be richly rewarded.*

ANNE LAMOTT¹



ALL MY LIFE I've run the hamster wheel of achievement and acceptance; a headstrong, Type-A control freak, looking for love. As a child I earned love by working hard to fit in. At church I earned love by memorizing verses. At school I earned love by pleasing teachers. Looking back, I see a girl in pigtails, acceptance her end game. In kindergarten, I repeated the sinner's prayer before I could write complete sentences, the fear of eternal fire motivation enough. I memorized King James verses with words like *sanctification*, *edification*, and *fornication*. I regurgitated the definition of *justification*—"just-as-if-I-hadn't-sinned"—even though I didn't understand what the words meant. I absorbed all this burdensome religion like a six-, seven-, and eight-year-old sponge, and furthermore, I believed it must be true, all of it.

Religion reigned.

In school, I served on the patrol squad, an honor given to the eldest and wisest of Elementaryland. I pinned a silver safety badge to my orange plastic vest and shoved the matching orange hard hat over my blonde curls, my chest puffed out with pride. (This began my affection for hats; I'm sure of it!) Taking very seriously our directive

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to enforce the school rules, I and the rest of the patrol squad would count to five as each subordinate took his or her turn at the water fountain. We carried the great responsibility of opening and closing car doors at pickup, impressing parents with the safety of their fledglings, encouraging them with our *Have-a-nice-days*.

Responsibility reigned.

Around that time, I picked up the trumpet. I wanted to play flute or clarinet like my girlfriends in elementary band, but my older brother was already renting a trumpet as a sophomore in high school. My parents informed me that if I wanted to play an instrument, I would have to share his. There was no financial margin for two rentals. And so, I picked up that shiny brass instrument, and standing in front of my mama's full-length bedroom mirror, I blew my heart out, squawking like a dying blue heron. Would I ever make that thing sing?

The trumpet became my ticket to being *somebody*, to being relevant or important. By seventh grade I attended band camp in North Carolina and played "How Great Thou Art" solo in front of a few hundred kids. As a sophomore, I sat first chair in trumpet, ahead of thirteen boys. As a junior and senior, I marched my way into competitions around the country, earning trophies as the drum major for our high school marching band, the Royal Ambassadors.

Achievement reigned.

A good girl in church, I continued to memorize Bible verses, played

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my heart out on the trumpet in the church orchestra, and only cussed with the cool kids at the back of the fourth grade playground. A chameleon of sorts, I adjusted my behavior to align with my environment throughout my tweens, with popularity as my goal. By high school I could read any social situation from a mile away. I was voted onto the homecoming court each year. Being liked was top priority; it made me feel important.

Donning ballet flats or Doc Martens, singing along to Amy Grant or The Cure, dating football players or percussionists, I worked to fit in with whoever surrounded me: athletes, musicians, cheerleaders, honor society members, student government members, brainiacs, teachers' kids, and doctors' kids. I kept my cool, grasping for permission to be fully known, and in spite of that, fully loved. Whether as a student government officer, honor society member, or drum major of the marching band, I joined in the performing. It was addicting, but I was good at the game.

Popularity reigned.

I ran miles around my neighborhood my senior year in high school, trying to wrestle things out as my feet hit the pavement. Who was this God who created me, and for what purpose? I'd learned the ways of religion, responsibility, and achievement. I'd learned the ways of fitting in, of popularity, and of being liked. But what about freedom? The God I was striving for was rigid and lifeless and seemed far away. And although I believed he was real, I wasn't convinced he was good. So I went on trying to be the best version of myself, hoping maybe I'd catch a glimpse of his approval. Legalism shaped me, driving my performance as I sought to earn his love.

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During my freshman year of college I gained fifteen pounds. After being mortified by how I looked in a Christmas family portrait, I worked hard to regain the ideal physical version of myself. I ratcheted up my running by spring, taking to the hills on a road behind campus we called “the roller coaster.” Up and down and up and down I ran, the motion a metaphor for the way I felt inside. I waited tables at Applebee’s, only allowing myself one French fry at the end of my eight-hour shift. If I ate a gummy bear, I followed it up with twenty jumping jacks to burn off the calories. My roomies worried, but the boys noticed. I liked the attention.

Approval reigned.

If someone had asked me in my youth, *Why all the striving?* I wouldn’t have had an answer. It took decades to peel back the layers of bondage. At the time, I held relational intimacy at arm’s length.

Come, but not too close; share, but not too much; live, but not too freely.

These were the mantras of my youth. I accepted the unspoken family, church, and social rule: *Keep up or suffer shame.* This message drove me to hustle for my worth at all costs. Quitting meant failure.

Strive to please; avoid shame; rinse and repeat.

Whenever I felt rejected or insecure, I buckled down with strategies to be more confident, more accepted, and more loved. I watched what others were doing and adopted their games. But the more I learned, the more fraudulent it all appeared. The cooler the person, the more fractured the heart.

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Every now and then, someone I knew would be honest about their struggles, and I'd breathe a sigh of relief. Finally! Someone was admitting life was hard, giving me permission to do the same. But this glimpse of vulnerability was always fleeting and never took place from a stage, especially in church.

I read freedom in the pages of Scripture, but it felt elusive and temporary. I belted out the hymn "Victory in Jesus" loud and often, although I couldn't find tangible victory myself. God's truth never changed or went away; I simply couldn't hear it over the clamor of religion. I couldn't hear God's voice when my head was down, when I was pursuing my own agenda or working to please others. I wore myself ragged trying to be enough, and it wore me out. I longed to be free.



Many months ago, I walked a Florida beach at sunset, Gabe and the kids having already gone inside. I lingered on the shore like a rebellious teen, watching the last sliver of crimson sun slip under the waves, far out on the horizon. Streaky pinks and golds burned into my mind, unlocking my memory of rhythm. And there, on the beach, I danced.

In the twisting and twirling, I recalled similar moments from high school. I remembered dancing in our living room each morning after the rest of my family left for the day, Erasure's "A Little Respect" blaring in my ears. When the song was over, I'd collapse in dizziness, regrouping and racing my ten-speed bicycle to school, arriving just

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seconds before the bell. This routine preserved something true and necessary.

I remembered, too, elementary evenings when Mama called me in at dusk. I lingered even then, pumping the pedals of my bike in an even cadence as I rode alone with God in the secret place, away from all the striving. In those days, I felt the least alone and most accepted in the secret places. *These were the rare moments when I felt completely free.*

There, two decades later on a Florida beach, I found that rhythm again as I danced. I felt a glimpse of the freedom God longed for me to live into, a reckless abandon blooming into unencumbered joy. As the wind picked up under the cotton candy sky, I pictured the Almighty looking down, eyes landing on his little girl leaping on the beach. Spontaneous and awkward, though I didn't care, I embraced this *déjà vu* moment alone with him at dusk. *This is what freedom feels like. This is the way I was meant to live,* I thought.

What strikes me now is this: even before I walked into healing and freedom, I believed in the Christ who came to set me free. God, the author and perfecter of my faith, kept me believing that freedom was found in him, even when others around me gave up. Even when my friends, youth group acquaintances, and classmates walked away from faith, I still believed. Come to think of it, maybe it's a miracle I believed in the notion of freedom. God gave me faith, even in my bondage. He knew I was free in him, even if I didn't yet understand it.

Maybe this is the miracle of grace.

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From the beginning of time, all God ever wanted was our union with him. He didn't create Adam and Eve because he wanted help cultivating the earth or naming the animals. Believe me, God is capable of this all by himself! No, he created man and woman because he wanted to offer companionship. They were the pinnacles of his creation. He delighted in Adam and Eve and wanted intimacy with them. His purpose for them—and us—was freedom to walk with him.

When I read the second chapter in Genesis, I picture Adam and Eve walking arm in arm with God across a wide meadow in the cool of the day. Eve throws her head back and laughs at their banter. The sun casts brilliant, yet soft light on the grain. The golden hour, they call it. The three of them walk around a bend and look out across a river, where the rays of sunlight dance. The wind rustles the grass for a moment, then stops. All is hushed and reverent.

The Eve of my imagination has made me a light-chaser all my life. In the golden hour, the Son feels close, as if he's kissing the earth. Perhaps that's why all of humanity craves a sunset. It's why I crave it.

Even now, when I take Communion in church, I feel the presence of my union with God. As I examine my heart, confessing my sin, eating his bread, and drinking from his cup, I receive the forgiveness of the new covenant. I'm reminded of God's closeness and my oneness with him. He takes my hand, as close as he was to Eve in the garden of Eden. He's always wanted garden walks and

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beachfront twirls with me, arm in arm. He wants them with you too. This is the God we serve, the one who calls us son or daughter, his beloved.

The freedom of Adam and Eve before the fall (even if it only lasted for a moment) is what makes captivity so heartbreaking. Consider the phrase in Hebrews, the “sin that so easily entangles.”² Like a vapor, it seeps in and covers our heads, blocks us from seeing the truth that’s been there all along—Christ has come to set us free! Sin creates confusion where what’s right seems wrong and what’s wrong seems right. Striving, rebellion, lack of faith, bitterness—all of these things keep us in bondage.

Until I began my journey toward freedom, the rules and regulations of legalism were weights that held me hostage. My desire for popularity, for relevance—this was bondage too. But most of all, *work* was my prison. I believed my value was only as good as my latest accomplishment. I never stopped hustling—there was always more worth to be earned. By this type of measuring stick, I’d never be enough. I chased life by the tail and was desperate to keep up. Keeping up became the sin that so easily entangles.

We weren’t made to keep up. We were made to be free. To be who we already are.

When Jesus says “follow me,” he calls us into his work, and we race to join him in the work of the kingdom, running as fast as our chain-laden legs will carry us. You see the problem, don’t you? Whoever heard of someone running a race in chains? Yet this is exactly what many in the church are doing.

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These chains become ankle weights. We grow accustomed to them, excuse them, work within their limitations. We begin to grow comfortable with them, perhaps decorate or even celebrate them. We eventually claim them as our *identity*, denying the possibility that these chains could fall away. How tragic, for despair is when we believe we will never truly change.

I'm here to tell you it's possible to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; to believe he came and died and rose again; and yet still not experience freedom. It is possible to believe and still wallow in the pit. Who wants that?

When we become enslaved to anything, we miss out on a life of surrender and peace. A life where we experience the truth that God is enough. A life where God is the Good Shepherd who gives us everything we need. A life where we lack nothing.

Many of us in the church operate from a place of wounding. Some hide their wounds in shame. Others aim to prove themselves worthy. Many seek the approval of others; they take pride in the work of their hands. Consequently, we have created a culture of inadequacy and comparison in the body of Christ, causing many believers to feel a terrible pressure to strive. I wonder if Jesus looks at all our posturing, and says, "I didn't ask you to do that."

We cannot prioritize our doing before being, our assignment before healing, our service before freedom.

Have you noticed how much brighter a light shines in the dark than in the light? It took moving from Atlanta—the center of the

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buckle of the Bible belt—to New York City—the center of fame and fortune—to understand how *unfree* I was. The first two years in Manhattan I slipped into the back row of the tiny church plant we attended on the Upper East Side. Our pastor taught in a tempered, shepherding tone with his rogue Australian accent, and I soaked up the promises of Jesus like a sponge. Promises of a life abundant, of being made new, of a hope reborn that won't disappoint. It was as if I'd never heard the good news before.

Every week I hid in the back row, sobbing during the sermon. I ran to the bathroom during the final prayer, before anyone saw my mascara-streaked cheeks. I had no idea why I was hurting so much. Looking back, I see it now—I was unraveling. I could perform no longer.

Those bathroom prayers at Trinity Grace Church were the beginning of the end of my striving. They were the prayers of a girl who longed for the rhythms of freedom, even if she didn't realize it yet. Jesus wanted to relieve me of this world's weight. He waited, just beyond the horizon, for me to be ready. He would come.

He would teach me to be free.

Becoming Free

At the end of each chapter, I'll offer a few questions and suggestions for you to consider. Grab a journal and a pen, and explore these prompts as honestly as possible. Allow these to link my story with yours. Allow them to be a gateway into an examination of your own life.

1. Do you remember a time in your life when you felt truly free? Perhaps you were in elementary school or newly married? Maybe you were a new parent. Whatever the case, write a few paragraphs describing this season in your life.
2. Sit in a quiet space and ask this question: When did bondage creep in? Ask God to show you, and sit in the silence as he provides the answer.
3. Prepare your heart for the areas of freedom we'll explore in this book. Consider praying this prayer: *Jesus, bring me into a place of true freedom with you. Show me the way back into your freedom.*

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