

YOU
ARE
FREE
BE WHO YOU
ALREADY ARE

REBEKAH LYONS

Foreword by **ANN VOSKAMP**

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You Are Free

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*For Cade, Pierce, and Kennedy;
May you remain as free as you are today,
where Jesus is only a whisper away.*

*Christ has set us free to live a free life.
So take your stand!
Never again let anyone put a
harness of slavery on you.
Just make sure that you don't use this
freedom as an excuse to do whatever you
want to do and destroy your freedom.
Rather, use your freedom to serve
one another in love;
that's how freedom grows.
For everything we know about God's
Word is summed up in a single sentence:
Love others as you love yourself.
That's an act of true freedom.
If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—
in no time at all you will be annihilating
each other, and where will your
precious freedom be then?
Live freely,
animated and motivated by God's Spirit.*

GALATIANS 5:1, 13–16 MSG

Contents

Foreword by Ann Voskamp . . . 13

Introduction 19

1	To Be Free	25
2	Free to Be Rescued	37
3	Free to Be Called	47
4	Free to Confess	59
5	Free to Thirst	71
6	Free to Ask	87
7	Free to Begin Again	103
8	Free to Wait	117
9	Free to Rest	131
10	Free to Grieve	145
11	Free to Be Weak	159
12	Free to Celebrate	175
13	Free to Be Brave	191
14	Free to Love	205
15	Free to Set Free	221

Acknowledgments 229

Notes 233

Foreword





MY GRANDAD TOLD ME a story once and that story became
a light.

A light that unlocks the dark and releases you into the land of a thousand suns.

Apparently, so the story went, there had been a tropical snake, longer than the length of a man, that wound its way up the stilts of a jungle cabana and slithered right into one unsuspecting woman's kitchen.

That woman turned around, split the day with one blood-curdling scream, and flung herself outside wide-eyed. That's about when a machete-wielding neighbor showed up, calmly walked into her kitchen, and sliced off the head of the reptilian thing.

The strange thing is that a snake's neurology and blood flow make it such that a snake still slithers wild even after it's been sliced headless.

For hours that woman stood outside, waiting.

Foreword

And the body of the snake still rampaged on, thrashing hard against windows and walls, destroying chairs and table and all things good and home.

My Grandad turned to say it, and I can tell you, it felt like a proclamation of emancipation:

A snake can only wreak havoc until it accepts it has no head—that it's actually dead.

The enemy of your soul can only wreak havoc in your life until you accept that it's already dead—and you're already free.

Be who you already are.

Be Free — because you already are free.

Your enemy is dead — so silence the lies in your head.

No enemy can't imprison you — because your Savior empowers you.

Nothing can hold you in bondage — because you are held by him.

Not one thing can hold you back — because his arms are holding you.

“Christ doesn't say you can be or may be or will be free. He says you are free,” Rebekah's words flame right here in these pages that are about to become a light, a key, in your very own hands.

I spent more than a month with Rebekah during the year this

You Are Free

book, these words, grew like a flame in her heart. Together, we poured over Scripture in a kibbutz outside of Jerusalem; literally walked the Emmaus road under stars; and prayed for our hearts to burn within us, that we might recognize Christ whatever road he had us on; stood under an arching double rainbow in Colorado and boldly trusted God for all of his promises; got down on our knees, our faces, broke our hearts before the heart of God under a Rocky Mountain rain. What you hold in your hands isn't an idea—it's an incarnation. Rebekah has enfleshed this freedom and I've witnessed it firsthand: Rebekah's freefall to fly has transformed her into a blazing harbinger of desperately needed reality: *Be who you already are.*

Is there a message that your soul needs more?

The greatest lie of the pit is that you have to prove yourself.

This is the lie that's bound you and ripped your heart out in a million ways.

The greatest truth of Christ's reality is that you are free — so live free. *Be who you already are.*

The snake's dead—*so silence the lies in your head.*

And the glory of true freedom is?

You are always made free *from* something — to become free *for* something.

Foreword

This is what the realest love does — it frees you *from* slavery and frees you *for* serving. From slavery to the dark to serving in the kingdom of light! From slavery to meaningless pain—to serving for the most meaningful purpose.

Bind yourself to Christ and you are free from everything else that binds.

Love always asks you to give up some freedoms to get the greatest freedoms of all: Security. Safety. Intimacy.

Freedom is not about doing whatever we want most—but the opportunity to do what is *most Christlike*.

Freedom is not having any limitations—freedom is having the best limitations for life transformation and realizations and destinations.

Hold these pages like a burning flame in the palm of your hands, like a begging, blazing key, like a bit of glowing sun that will grow you into freedom soaring on wind.

The snake is still. *Your saving is here.*

“God never guides us at some time in the future, but always here and now.

Realize that the Lord is here now, and the freedom you receive is immediate,” wrote Oswald Chambers. Rebekah echoes these words.

You Are Free

Immediate freedom.

Begin.

You are released.

ANN VOSKAMP,
author of the *New York Times* Bestsellers
The Broken Way & *One Thousand Gifts*

Introduction





I STARTED WRITING this freedom story two years ago. I felt confident and full of faith as I began to walk it out, with almost a sense of bravado about the idea of God's goodness. I wanted to shout from the rooftops, "Let's all get free so we can get about the work!" Easy-peasy, right?

But when the time for writing came, the words dried up. Perhaps I hadn't quite cracked the code on freedom after all. *If God wants to set captives free*, I thought, *then let's do this already*. We simply need to release our grip on the bars and step out of our metaphorical jail cells into this abundant life, right? And yet the minute I tried to articulate this truth in written form, I felt more enslaved than ever before.

The dry spell sent me reeling. I said to God, "I can't do this! I'm ill-equipped." If I really believed this freedom thing, it would mean Jesus was enough to free me from *anything*, any kind of brokenness I carried in this world. Although I'd experienced a taste of the freedom God has for me, the darkness in our world still felt too great.

I thought, *Maybe full freedom is just something we hope for and stay*

Introduction

quiet about, not to be realized until heaven. Maybe I'm crazy to write a book about it.

I went back to the pages of Scripture, which assured me that we are to live as people who are free¹ because Christ has already set us free,² and gave us the Spirit to keep us free.³ Furthermore, Jesus declared a kingdom come—a kingdom of complete freedom—here on earth as it is in heaven,⁴ and Paul teaches that this kingdom power lives in us.⁵ This means that even in our feeble weakness, if we claim Christ and his resurrection, somehow we are God's agents who carry freedom to the world.



Why don't we see this kind of kingdom-come freedom more? What Scripture teaches about freedom and what we witness in our everyday lives are two opposing realities. We hobble through our days, yet we long for the God of the grand gesture, the one who splits the seas where they surface and exposes the foundations of the world with a single breath.⁶ Jesus promised life abundant, but this challenges our experience of brokenness and captivity. How often do we wonder, *Is what the Bible teaches true?*

We want the Jesus who beckons us out on the water, the Jesus who takes our feeble offering, blesses it, and multiplies it. And yet, here we are, living our lives one small step at a time, feeling so powerless to loosen the chains that bind us, let alone help others live in freedom.

We can know in our minds that God has set us free—when we were

You Are Free

young we may have even learned and memorized verses telling us this—and *still* God's power has not rescued us from the pit. The good news is that sometimes God uses the pit to teach us about freedom. In the pit, we become aware of our captivity; we can no longer deny we are enslaved. When we are in the pit, there is no mistaking our bondage.

Galatians is the book on freedom, and it's not written to those outside the church, it's written to the church. Paul saw the temptation of the religious to add works to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection (rendering the cross not enough). He reacted strongly to this for six chapters, making sure we understand when Christ calls us to a free life, he calls us to operate out of the freedom *he has already given us*.

This is the point of good news, the gospel. We cannot add to it, or diminish it. Paul urges, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery."⁷

Paul's poignant words echo in our hallowed halls today.

How many of us have lost our way? Maybe we knew freedom in grade school, in college, or in our early twenties, but somewhere along the way our freedom turned to survival, and we put on masks too painful to take off. We began to condemn ourselves with our own words, saying, "We are too much," or "We are too little." Yet God persisted.

Freedom comes when we know God is enough, when he is our everything. When he is our peace and our strength, joy, and rest. Our

Introduction

provision, healer, hope, fortress, shelter, strong tower, and Father. Freedom reveals everything good is from him and by him and for him. Every breath we take, every person we encounter, every word we utter is all an expression of a freedom where God dwells in us and loves through us!

What if we became this kind of dwelling place? Where we allowed him to set us free, so we could help set others free?

In the upcoming pages I will walk you through my own journey into this kind of freedom so that you might begin to grow in freedom too. I suspect we will laugh and cry a bit, if my writing process gives any indication. We will wrestle through tough realities. I'll ask questions, some easy to answer and others painful to recount. My only request is that you leave nothing on the table. No stone unturned, no whispers unspoken, no secret still hidden. This freedom thing is costly but *worth it*.

Freedom is for everyone who wants it—the lost, the wounded, and those weary from all of the striving. It's for those who gave up trying years ago. It's for professional Christians hiding secrets. It's for the angry and hurt, for those both brilliant and burnt by the Christian song and dance. I write for you, for all of you. You are the church, the people of God. You were meant to be free.

Will you join in this freedom journey with me?



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

To Be Free

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

You Are Free

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.

To Be Free

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.

You Are Free

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

To Be Free

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.

You Are Free



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

To Be Free

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.

You Are Free

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

To Be Free

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.*



Free to Be Rescued

*“If you are going to be used by God,
He will take you through a multitude of experiences
that are not meant for you at all,
they are meant to make you useful in His hands.”*

OSWALD CHAMBERS¹



LONG BEFORE MARRIAGE, before children, before my freedom journey began, I marched off to college at Liberty University in Virginia, a fifteen-hour drive from my Florida home. I subconsciously chased *liberté* even then, although I only applied to the university because all applicants were promised a free sweat-shirt. Others thought Liberty was too strict—back then the dress code required women to wear dresses and men to wear ties—but not me. I was used to rules, and the rules at Liberty were more lenient. The midnight curfew was a dream, an hour beyond my 11 p.m. curfew at home!

Gabe and I met my sophomore year and fell in love three years later. One night at an off-campus party, while trying to impress me with his dance maneuvers, Gabe sprained his ankle. When he fell, so did I.

I knew I'd found my dancing kindred.

Our love burned like a Roman candle: white hot and fast. Gabe's view of the world was as big as the sea, and I was caught up in all his dreaming. Our hearts were bigger than our brains, but that was okay. We were married three months (to the day) after he proposed,

Free to Be Rescued

and zeal carried us through our first three years, until the fateful day our first son was born, our son with Down syndrome.

What once seemed so important to us no longer was, and something we'd never considered—what it means to be parents of a child with special needs—became front and center. Gabe left his successful career path as vice president of a leadership training company and came home to work from the couch. He was beginning his own freedom journey, and this was a step down that path.

Gabe's new career path was exciting. We started an organization, Q, which hosted events to equip Christians to engage our culture. As Q grew, thousands of thoughtful Christians gathered to learn in a new city each year. We convened in Atlanta, New York, Chicago, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Portland, Austin, Nashville, Boston, and Denver; we discussed what we were *for* as followers of Christ instead of what we were *against*.

Gabe was first to catch the itch to move to New York City. It was the center of American culture, the capital of new ideas. It was the perfect home for Q, he thought. I resisted for three years; how could a Southern girl leave Atlanta for New York City? Finally I relented, adopting the idealism that comes with any mid-life reset. We loaded three kids and two toy poodles into our minivan (a vehicle which is not hip anywhere, but is especially uncool when pulling into midtown Manhattan), but that's exactly what we did.

I thought New York would bring new adventure. I wanted to do something grand for God in the Big Apple. But instead of living out a life of grandiose meaning, I found myself melting down.

You Are Free

Moving to this city of eight and a half million people threw me into a tailspin. I was on an airplane over New York during my first panic attack; fear closed in, threatened to capsize everything. This first bout of anxiety set in motion a cycle that could not be reversed.

Anxiety became my fancy word for fear.

I feared God was not enough or that he didn't see my struggle. Had I known my anxiety was a gift, a kindness that would reveal and help heal the wounds hidden deep within me, I wouldn't have been so afraid of it.

The panic took over in trains, subways, elevators, and crowds. If you've visited Manhattan (or any large metropolis, for that matter) you know it's impossible to avoid these things. One day, panic set in as the subway doors closed. I tried to pry them apart, clawing at them with my hands. Coffee splashed on the ground; I shed my scarf and coat in a desperate attempt to breathe more freely. But the train took off anyway with me trapped inside it, engulfed in hot tears and desperate prayers.

When you go from being a high functioning individual to not being able to breathe on your own, you suddenly realize your smallness. Your *weakness*.

In the midst of this, I watched my husband, my unintentional foil. He practically skipped down the streets of New York, filled with clarity and purpose, an awareness I'd never known. I'd assumed the city would be a perfect place to recover my own passions, but that didn't seem to be working out. I wrestled with God in the snowy

Free to Be Rescued

solitude of Central Park at dawn, where I walked each day that winter, searching for strength.

My anxiety attacks continued for almost a year. One Tuesday morning, friends gathered to pray that I would be delivered from fear and panic. Late that night, I woke as I'd done so many times before, unable to breathe, unable to speak. I could only grip my husband's arms while he interceded for me. Finally I found my voice and confessed my desperate need:

"God, rescue me; deliver me; I cannot do this without you."

In an instant my panic evaporated. My once shaking body grew calm. My breathing became normal, and my heart stopped racing. All was still. Nothing moved except my eyes, which were darting back and forth. In more charismatic circles, people would say God healed me instantly, but this Baptist girl had no language for it.

I'm not sure what I expected the night Light finally broke through the darkness. The truth is, I did not have a framework to understand the miracle of healing. I'd never given serious consideration to this type of rescue becoming part of my story. It conjured an image that made me feel unsure. I wondered how this kind of healing would impact me spiritually.

I'd watched many friends of my generation walk away from church after high school, not because the church wasn't full of well-intentioned hearts, but because they weren't experiencing the power of God—the power that transforms, heals, breaks chains, and literally sets us free.

You Are Free

I grew up thinking of the Holy Ghost as something akin to a boogey man or a creepy sheet-draped teenager with cut-out eyes on Halloween. I didn't study or understand the Spirit. It wasn't a significant part of my upbringing. The Spirit seemed mysterious, unpredictable. What if all this Holy Spirit stuff was just in our heads, I wondered.

Up until the moment God set me free from panic attacks, I did not believe I could be healed of depression and panic, even when friends laid hands on me and prayed for healing. Because mental illness ran in my family, I believed it was my lot in life. I was convinced I would have it all—panic attacks, claustrophobia, nervous energy, difficulty breathing. It never occurred to me to ask for healing, to stretch into the belief that such a thing was possible. Instead, I considered practical ways to manage my fear. I went through the motions of the Christian life, even though despair had replaced faith in my heart. And here's the thing about despair: It overtakes the place meant for hope. It steals the belief that healing is possible.

Despite my slavery to disbelief, God intervened in the early hours of a fateful September morning in 2011. In utter desperation, I asked God to heal me, and when I lifted my left hand to the heavens with a cry for rescue, healing came. I remembered how I tiptoed out of my apartment later that day, cautious and unsure. Did the healing take? Would the smothering begin again on my way to the subway? Days turned into weeks. I reported to my friends—*no panic yet*.

The city burst into living color as October trees lined the mall of Central Park with oranges, golds, and reds. I remember how my soul came alive again, how it slowly unfurled. I stayed in the present,

Free to Be Rescued

absorbed each sunrise and sunset. *Is this what rebirth feels like?* I pondered. All the noticing and the beholding? How had I never felt this in thirty years of being a Christian? God and I seemed to share this secret in the middle of a bustling world.

I'd encountered healing, and I was swept up in it. I took my first step toward freedom in the admission of my weakness, and the acknowledgment of my inability to carry the weight of the world. God rescued me from panic disorder. The words of David took on new meaning, "In my distress I called to the LORD; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears . . . He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he drew me out of deep waters . . . He brought me out into a spacious place; he rescued me because he delighted in me."² It was a rebirth of sorts, and I was a spiritual baby all over again, seeing the world in living color.

Even still, rescue felt strange. It was, perhaps, the first time I'd ever begged for anything from God, so even after healing came, I didn't use the "h" word. I feared hearing, "Sure, that's your story. Lucky you." Why was I healed when I didn't really expect it, when so many others have offered pleas for decades to no avail? It didn't seem fair. I knew God wasn't an alienating God, and he didn't rescue me because I had "enough" faith—in fact, it was quite the opposite. He'd found me in my deepest, darkest moment, in the desperation of my complete and utter surrender.

During the first eighteen months of my struggle, I couldn't see beyond my own problems. When healing came, scales fell from my eyes. I began to see the weight in so many others walking the

You Are Free

city streets, just like me. I started watching people, studying their features, guessing their stories, and engaging on the rare occasion when someone would make eye contact.

When I was sick, I only looked inward. Through healing, I started seeing everyone else.

With a bit of trepidation, I began to share my story with close friends. This circle eventually widened to include new acquaintances, then advanced to anyone who'd take more than five minutes to chat with me. As I shared my story, women responded. As if unlocking windows into their souls, women seemed to feel permission to be honest with me about their struggles. We'd pray together, cry together. I caught a glimpse of God waking others to his desire and ability to meet them in their places of need. I saw healing start to happen in deep and powerful ways, more diverse than I'd ever imagined.

This wasn't my story of struggle; it was his story of rescue.

I wondered, could God use this to bring freedom to others? This was uncharted territory, but I was ready to follow the path he'd chosen. I trusted God would take my hand. He would lead and guide me.

Becoming Free

1. My journey into freedom began with a confession of my need for healing. Maybe you're facing poor health (mental or otherwise) in your own life. If so, in what areas do you need the healing touch of God? He invites you to confess your need to him.
2. Consider praying together with me that God would heal your needs. *Jesus, come to me in my need and bring healing and wholeness to every part of my life.*