



*Set the oppressed free, remove the chains that bind, give clothes to those who need them.*

# OUT OF THE HOUSE OF SLAVERY: FREEDOM & THE CHRISTIAN

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There are an estimated 45,000,000 people held in slavery today, more than at any other point in human history. At the same time, an incredible awakening is happening within the church, in which the people of God are reclaiming the prophetic call to seek justice and rescue the oppressed. God’s heart, His passion for justice and for freedom, is becoming known again throughout the lands.

Fifteen years ago, I married an honest to goodness, real deal, authentic mountain climber. As we combined our “households,” I brought to the union two guitars, a shotgun, rifle, fly rod, leather chair, and a sweet stereo system. And Shannon blessed me with every Nanci Griffith CD ever produced, a red mountain bike, a blender, an ice axe, a nice tent, and this famous book called *Freedom of the Hills*, published by the Mountaineers. I’d heard about this book, but I never had the courage to buy it.

This book tells you everything you need to know to be a mountain climber. It describes equipment, knots, climbing techniques, and even how to build a snow cave. It is known as “The Bible” of mountaineering and climbing. The information in the book is so important that you can even get playing cards that recite

the more critical facts in the book, so you can devote them to memory and review.

Sound familiar?

If you master the information in this amazing book, you will have all the knowledge necessary to experience the “Freedom of the Hills.” But we all realize that just reading the book, even memorizing the critical points, will not make you a mountain climber; it will not give you the experience of the mountains, this Freedom of the Hills. To be a mountain climber, well, you must climb a mountain.

But mountain climbing is risky; it’s hard. There is rain, snow, and ice. The mountain resists you. Gravity works against you. Even the air is an obstacle—there’s just not a lot of

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oxygen. Climbers are exposed and vulnerable on mountains. Sometimes they get hurt. It's just not very safe.

It is safe and secure on the sofa by the fire. There is nothing resisting you. Gravity is your friend. The temperature is controlled. There are books, Nanci Griffith CDs, a television, computers, a refrigerator, comfort, and security abounding.

But if you stay safe, if you avoid the risk and vulnerability of the mountains, you will never have the experience of the soaring heights, never know the experience of pushing through adversity to feel the joy of the summit. You can read about it, but you will never truly know the Freedom of the Hills. So, if you avoid the mountains, you will be safe, but it will be kind of unfulfilling. A sense of something missing. And all that knowledge about mountain climbing, well, it will really make no meaningful difference in your life.

This situation, where the knowledge is there but the actual experience is missing, is not too different from what we see in Isaiah 58. God's people are frustrated because God is not showing up the way they expect Him to show up. They are not having the experience of Him that they anticipated.

Isaiah 58:2-3 reads:

Yet they act so pious!  
They come to the Temple every day  
and seem delighted to learn all about me.  
They act like a righteous nation  
that would never abandon the laws of its God.  
They ask me to take action  
on their behalf,  
pretending they want to be near me.  
'We have fasted before you!' they say.  
'Why aren't you impressed?'  
We have been very hard on ourselves,  
and you don't even notice it!

After reciting His people's complaints regarding their unmet expectation, their lack of experience of Him, God tells them what the problem is:

You are fasting to please yourselves.  
Even while you fast,  
you keep oppressing your workers.  
What good is fasting  
when you keep on fighting and quarreling?  
This kind of fasting  
will never get you anywhere with me.  
You humble yourselves  
by going through the motions of penance,  
bowing your heads  
like reeds bending in the wind.  
You dress in burlap  
and cover yourselves with ashes.  
Is this what you call fasting?  
Do you really think this will please the LORD?

These verses identify the very essence of the problem: the people of God are "going through the motions." They are "fasting to please themselves." It is empty, self-centered religious knowledge and ritual. There is no risk, no exposure, no vulnerability, and no need of faith. This is vacant, inward-facing religious activity. It does not draw them near to God.

In the next few verses, God tells His people what they must do to draw near to him:

No, this is the kind of fasting I want:  
Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;  
lighten the burden of those who work for you.  
Let the oppressed go free,  
and remove the chains that bind people.  
Share your food with the hungry,  
and give shelter to the homeless.  
Give clothes to those who need them,  
and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

This is how we draw near to God. This is true fasting: free the oppressed, remove the chains, feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless. Then, with this true fast, comes an incredible promise:

Then your salvation will come  
like the dawn,  
and your wounds will quickly heal.  
Your godliness will lead you forward,



*Mirabelle finds her freedom. Following this rescue, IJM has helped deliver over 1200 girls from slavery. There remains much work to be done. Image credit: IJM.*

and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.

Then when you call, the LORD will answer.

‘Yes, I am here,’ he will quickly reply.

When you call, the Lord will answer. Such an incredible promise. When you leave safety and security behind, He’ll respond, “Yes, I am here.” When you take the risk and become vulnerable, He’ll respond, “Yes, I am here.” When you engage with the brokenness of the world, He’ll respond, “Yes, I am here.” When you free the oppressed and break the chains, still He’ll respond, “Yes, I am here.” God promises to meet us out there—in the mess, the chaos, the hopelessness, and the heartache of human suffering. “Yes, I am here.”

It’s a great promise. But is it really true? Well, my colleagues and I at International Justice Mission (IJM) have been putting this promise to the test for the last 20 years, and we have found it to be absolutely and completely true. Let me give you one example.

Sixteen years ago, in the year 2000, I left my law firm, and IJM sent me to open an office in the Philippines. I was the only one who applied for the job.

After landing in Manila, the first thing I did was build a team. The team we put on the ground in Manila to end the rampant and unrestrained sex trafficking of children included an American on his first trip to Asia, three recent college graduates, and an unemployed pastor. We had no training, no experience, no credibility, and very limited resources.

But here’s the thing: we knew that there were children and young women enslaved in the brothels of Manila and that unless the traffickers were stopped, they would sell those women and children night after night after night—until there was nothing left to sell. We also knew that God loved those women and children so much He sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to die on a cross for them, and he wanted them to be free. What did Jesus say? “The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy.

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But I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

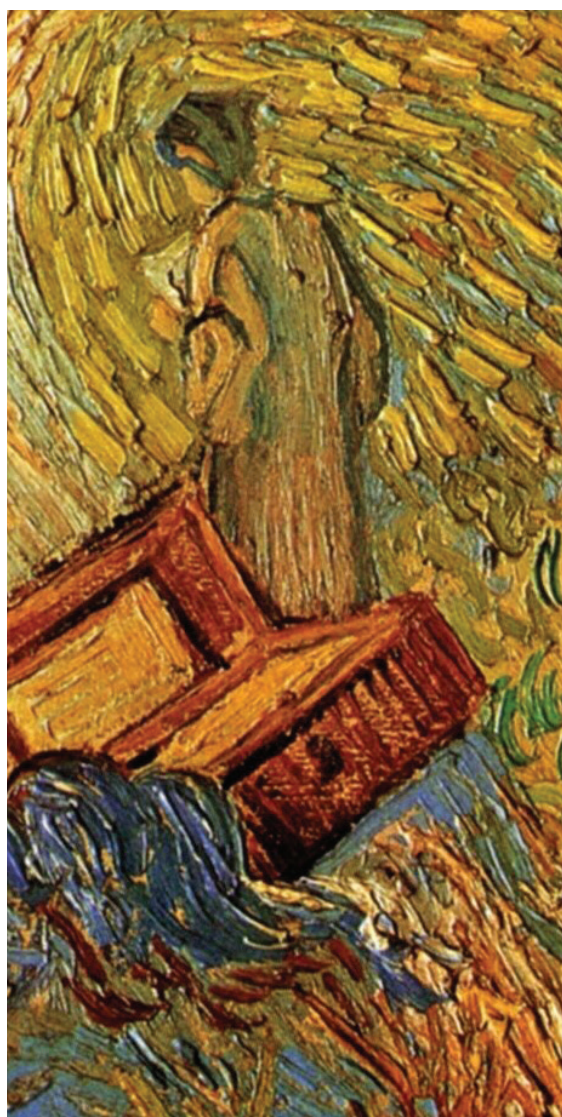
So we prayed—a lot—and we met with the local police to ask for help. In our first meeting, the officers explained that they had an established approach to these sex trafficking cases. Posing as customers, they would pay the pimps, and actually have sex with the minors. The officers said this was how they proved the minors were being sold for sex. The officers asked me for money so that they could buy some minor girls, and have sex with them. I politely declined.

At that time, the truth is that the police were not really doing *anything* about the children that had been trafficked into Manila’s brothels. The Philippines had sufficient laws to protect these children—the problem was there was no law enforcement.

You see, these were poor girls, from poor families, living in poor communities, with no power, no influence, no education, and ultimately—in the human economy—no value. They were just rags, rags for broken men to wipe their filth on, and then be locked away in some dark corner until the next customer comes along and paid to abuse them. But God saw them differently.

In late 2001, Bob Mosier, IJM’s then VP of Investigations, came to Manila to help us conduct our first sex trafficking investigation. Posing as customers, Bob and I went through the go-go bars and brothels of one of the red light districts of Manila. We met a pimp named Dodo. He offered us some minor girls. We arranged to come back later that week and purchase them.

Bob and I met with the police early the next day and shared our information, including pictures of the victims and maps of the brothels. Faced with this undeniable level of documentation, the police had no choice, and they reluctantly agreed to do an operation. The police insisted we rent a hotel suite and bring the girls there. Bob went to the brothel to purchase the girls, and I waited in the suite with an undercover police officer.



*Do not fast to please yourself, do not go through the motions of penance.*

That night, December 13, 2001, we rescued a young girl. Her name was Mirabelle. She was 16 years old. From a poor family in the province, she had come to Manila based on the promise of a good job to help her family. Instead, she found herself forced into prostitution.

Mirabelle was the very first girl that IJM rescued in the Philippines. It turned out that this was just the beginning. Since that night, IJM has worked with Philippine authorities to rescue over 1,200 women and girls from commercial sexual exploitation.

But it’s not enough. It’s not enough to rescue these girls. When you meet them, and when

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you understand what they've gone through, and the impact it has on them—it's just not enough. We wanted to have stopped them from ever having been abused at all.

So based on lessons learned in cases like Mirabelle's, over the last 15 years IJM has worked with the Philippine government to pass new comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation, to stand up and train a new Anti-Trafficking Division of the National Police committed to protecting children from violence and exploitation, and to increase the level of care for trafficking survivors to address their needs for trauma treatment, for reintegration, for hope and recovery.

Finally, IJM has worked with the major Christian denominations in the Philippines to build the Philippine Interfaith Movement Against Human Trafficking. The Church in the Philippines—comprised of people just like you and me—is mobilizing to advocate for the vigorous enforcement of anti-trafficking laws designed to keep children safe and to provide critical aftercare for the rescued.

This transformation started in a few project areas, but now the Philippine government is replicating the practice across the entire country. Even more amazing, the government is funding these initiatives and new capacities with its own money.

This is incredible.

But now that the government is enforcing the laws designed to protect children, the question becomes, "Does it make any difference?"

The answer is absolutely and conclusively, yes! Just in the last five years, in the areas we have been able to measure, we are seeing reductions in the number of children being sold for sex ranging from 76 to 86%. In addition to all the girls who have been rescued, this means there are thousands more who will never be abused in the first place.

Can a broken justice system that has never worked be transformed to the point that it actually protects poor, vulnerable children?

Yes. And if the police and courts begin enforcing the law, will the children be safer? Yes. Absolutely, yes. Justice for the weak, the poor, and the marginalized is possible.

When I went to Manila 16 years ago, my goal was to rescue just one girl. This honestly seemed impossible. I remember telling the senior partner at my law firm that I was resigning and what I was going to do, and he couldn't help himself. He just started laughing at me. That was a totally reasonable response because actually nobody was doing this, nobody had ever done it, and I had never even *been* to Asia. I had only been a lawyer for three years.

But remember that promise? Free the oppressed, break the chains, "Then when you call on me, I will answer, 'Yes, I am here.'"

And God did meet me there. He was there. There among the abused and forgotten, in the brothels and the bars, in my fear and frustration, in my weakness and vulnerability—God was there. When I did not know what to do or whom to trust, I cried out to God, and He responded, "YES, I AM HERE." And He did the miracle: over a thousand children set free, thousands more who will never be abused, a justice system transformed.

This has been my experience at IJM. And it is an open invitation to you today—to show the world that God is real, that He does care.

Remember that book, the crazy book, *Freedom of the Hills*? The Bible of mountaineering. Will you be the person who buys the book, reads it, memorizes the key facts and principles, believes those principles with all your heart, but who never actually climbs? Never experiences the Freedom of the Hills?

Or will you head out into the mountains and climb?

I know there are a lot who are already veteran mountain climbers reading this, strong climbers. Will you *keep* climbing? And there are those who *used* to climb—when you were younger, maybe a little more reckless—come, will you climb *again*?

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God is real. He does actually hear the cry of the oppressed. He is inviting us—you and me—to show the world that this is true: “God loves you. He heard your cry for relief. He has sent me to help you.”

What is God asking you to do today? What is stirring in your heart? Consider three very concrete ways to head up into the mountains.


First, think about the needs right within your arm’s reach, the closest of the close: the neighbor who lost his job, the friend who lost his or her spouse, a kid who lost her way, a brother struggling with addiction, a sister whose husband just walked out on her, maybe a co-worker who is chronically ill with no support system. What are the needs of the people in your life?

Second, consider engaging, or creating, the ministries of your church: ministries to the people in your community who are desperately in need of help, people who have been marginalized, set on the outskirts, into the darkness, pushed out, people out of whom the brutality of the world has crushed all their hope. Will you help them? Will you show them that God is real, and that Jesus cares?

Finally, help those well beyond our arm’s reach: the girl held captive in a brothel, the

little boy taken from his family and enslaved on a fishing boat, the family held captive in a rock quarry. Where we cannot go ourselves, we can send others in our stead to rescue them—to show them that God is real, and that He does care.

The great paradox is that as we take steps of faith, as we step away from comfort, as we take the risks necessary to free others, we are ourselves freed, *we* are set free. God sets *us* free, free from bondage: to fear God sets us free, free from bondage, fear, control, and the unhealthy attachments that enslave us. He set us free to be God’s agents of love and redemption in a broken and hurting world, and free to be the person God created us to be, the very person that he intended when he brought us into life. Jesus is waiting for us, for *you*—out there—with the broken and abused, the poor and powerless, the hopeless and heartbroken. Jesus is there.

If you go to them, if you send the help that is desperately needed, “Then, when you call, the LORD will answer, ‘YES, I AM HERE.’” 

**Sean Litton** serves as President of International Justice Mission. This essay is adapted from a sermon delivered on Freedom Sunday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, at The Falls Church Anglican. To learn more or join the fight, check out IJM & their Freedom Partner Program at [www.ijm.org](http://www.ijm.org).