



# UNCHAINED

IF JESUS HAS SET US FREE,  
WHY DON'T WE FEEL FREE?

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UNCHAINED  
Published by David C Cook  
4050 Lee Vance View  
Colorado Springs, CO 80918 U.S.A.

David C Cook U.K., Kingsway Communications  
Eastbourne, East Sussex BN23 6NT, England

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LCCN 2016952724  
ISBN 978-1-4347-0995-0  
eISBN 978-1-4347-1001-7

© 2017 Noel Jesse Heikkinen  
Published in association with the literary agency of Mark  
Sweeney & Associates, Naples, FL 34113.

The Team: Tim Peterson, Amy Konyndyk, Nick Lee,  
Jon Middel, Jack Campbell, Susan Murdock  
Cover Design: Nick Lee  
Cover Photos: Creative Market  
Author Photo and Interior Artwork: Josh Michels

Printed in the United States of America  
First Edition 2017

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

111616

PART ONE

# THE PROBLEM WITH CHAINS



## CHAPTER 1

# FREEDOM SURE DOESN'T FEEL VERY FREE

“Have you ever eaten pig brain?”

I was pretty sure something had been lost in translation. I was sitting in a restaurant in China with a new friend, and he was telling me about his favorite dish.

“Excuse me? Have I ever eaten what?”

“Pig brain,” he said with precise English seasoned with a Mandarin lilt. “It’s a delicacy.”

When you travel internationally, you encounter moments like this when avoiding cultural offense supersedes adhering to dietary restrictions you didn’t even know you had. My first thought was *There’s no way I am eating that*, and up until the moment I did, a piece of my own brain held onto that conviction.

I soon learned that pig brain arrives at the table the way all other meat does in that part of the world—raw. The waiter set the

plate of brain on the table, and it jiggled like undercooked tofu (which, I would learn, is also precisely how it feels on the tongue). My friend unceremoniously dumped the brain into a vat of boiling soup base simmering in the center of the table and told me to be careful not to overcook my brain.

Clearly.

A few minutes later, he plunged his chopsticks into the oily red liquid, fished out a goopy piece of brain, and tossed it into his mouth without hesitation. He then looked at me with equal parts elation and challenge in his eyes.

It was my turn.

I don't know if he believed I would do it, but I'm not one to back down from a challenge, even one as unpalatable as this. I also didn't want to be "that American" who refused to embrace new cultures. As fast as I could (so I wouldn't chicken out), I snagged a piece of brain floating in the soup, and onto my tongue it squished. The texture was, to put it politely and ironically, unnerving. It wasn't the worst thing I had ever eaten, but I probably won't go out of my way to order that particular entrée again. With great joy and a lot of laughter, we finished our meal, and somehow the chicken stomach and quail eggs we ate next seemed very tame.

Freedom tastes a lot like pig brain.

## THE UNNERVING TASTE OF FREEDOM

Any self-respecting, law-abiding, faithful first-century Jew would have politely passed on my Chinese friend's meal or run for the

door in disgust, but not for the same reasons I was tempted to. The Jews would have refused the dish because eating any part of a pig was a violation of the Mosaic Law (Lev. 11:7). Their revulsion would even extend to bacon. They would never touch the stuff even if it were as glorious as greasy, thick-cut, smoke-cured, pan-fried bacon.

Mmm, bacon.

Anyone who knows me well can attest to my love affair with bacon. Of course, part of me wishes I had never told my church how much I love the stuff. Don't get me wrong; I'm not ashamed of my love. It's just that nearly every gift I get from people in my church is bacon related. I am the proud owner of two bacon calendars, a "Bacon Makes Everything Better" plaque, and a stick of bacon balm—and that is just a smoky-flavored teaser of the gifts I receive on a regular basis. Here's the problem: as well intentioned as the givers are, the calendars, the plaque, and the bacon balm aren't bacon. (And don't even get me started on the travesty known as bacon chocolate.) These products certainly smell like bacon, look like bacon, and they even tell me lots of interesting facts about bacon, but they *are not bacon!*

Freedom is a lot like bacon (or pig brains if you happen to be in China). Churches like to talk about it and make calendars about it, but have they really tasted the stuff? And once they have tasted it, do they like it? Are they true to bacon, or do they flirt with bacon-themed imitations?

I have often tried to imagine the look on the apostle Peter's face the first time he tasted pork. Having grown up as Jewish as

they came, he never would have touched it until he understood he was set free to do so by Jesus (Mark 7:19). Being the impetuous type, he probably ordered a BLT with the same cavalier attitude I ordered the pig brain. Did he rethink his decision when the sandwich was being made to order? Did he try to figure out how he could back out of the deal? And when it hit the table and he raised it to his lips, was it joy or terror in his eyes?

I hope there are DVRs in heaven so I can watch a replay of that first porky meal. Did he savor each foreign bite like a baby tasting ice cream for the first time? Was the stigma so grotesque to him that he reacted like a contestant on *Fear Factor* biting into a deep-fried tarantula?

For some people, truly tasting freedom for the first time can be delicious; for others, even the thought is scandalous; for still others, it can be downright scary and foreign.

That's why Kate declared, "I want to believe it, but I can't."

It wasn't the first time she had uttered those words (or similar words) in the small group that met in her living room. We had grown accustomed to Kate's internal battle, and the verse we were talking about had set her spinning again: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). We were discussing the implications of that freedom and how God was pleased with her because of Jesus.

"God must be at least *a little bit* disappointed with me."

Disappointment is what she had come to expect. Dads can do that to a little girl, as can teachers, coaches, spouses, and schoolyard bullies. When a person is told often enough that she is worthless, it becomes hard to disagree. The older that person gets, the more this

external valuation becomes internally validated. Then along comes the ultimate truth of Scripture, which says encouraging things such as, “None is righteous, no, not one . . . All have turned aside; together they have become worthless” (Rom. 3:10, 12).

When I first met Kate, she had synthesized this scriptural Truth (with a capital *T*) with the experiential truth (with a decidedly lowercase *t*) of her upbringing into a toxic spiritual reality. All she knew was that she was in need of saving. That’s when she met Jesus. She placed her faith in Him and believed that *one day* she would be with Him forever, eternally free. Tragically, the reality of her eternal salvation didn’t connect with her here and now. In this place, all she felt was His disapproving frown.

Kate believed in Jesus, and she was as devoted as they came. She met a wonderful Christian man and became an equally wonderful Christian wife and mom. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake this nagging feeling that God was tallying up her missteps, tsk-tsking every time she slipped up. *Eternal* forgiveness didn’t mean she was let off the hook *today*. Every day Kate walked around with heavy chains around her soul, and she’s not the only one.

Robert can’t kick his porn habit and feels as though he wears a scarlet letter ever since it ruined his marriage.

Emily wonders if the history of past relationships dutifully recorded in her journal, memory, and bed have made her “spoiled goods” to any guy she meets in church.

Phil is haunted by his alcoholism even though he is seventeen years sober.

Jennifer laments her atrocious prayer life that consists of no more than ninety seconds on a good day before her mind is overcome by her monstrous to-do list and screaming toddler.

Chains have become so much a part of our daily existence that we don't even know that we are weighed down.

I certainly didn't.

## NOEL, THE RECOVERING HYPOCRITE

I grew up in a fantastic Christian home in which my parents took me to a faithful, Bible-believing church. We went to Sunday school and VBS regularly, and I had the perfect-attendance stickers to prove it. I preached my first sermon as a middle schooler (my mom wrote it for me) and became president of the youth group when I was in high school (I still don't know why we needed officers). All of this was just enough to satisfy any doubts anyone may have had that I was saved. But there was just this one little problem: I was a hypocrite. I went to school one town over from where I lived and went to church. In this town, I could do what I wanted with whomever I wanted whenever I wanted ... and I did. I wasn't a super-rebellious kid, but anyone who really knew me would have seen the disconnect between what I said I believed and how I lived my life.

If that wasn't enough, there was an even bigger problem: I didn't know there was anything wrong with living two lives, at least not consciously. I had somehow caught the notion that a Christian's spiritual life was something he did at church or when he was around his mom and dad. When around his friends, he

could drop the act. However, in my case, I had friends who went to the same church I did, so I had to subconsciously and delicately keep my worlds apart. I couldn't very well have my girlfriend show up at church; that would have quite literally spoiled all the fun. Let's just say I recognize the look in couples' eyes when they come to church together after a night ... together.

Looking back, I am not sure how my conscience didn't connect the dots, but this life I was living was, for all intents and purposes, perfect. So perfect. Sin was fun, and I was (and am) a great sinner. Armed with years of hypocritical experience, off I went to college. As a seventeen-year-old freshman at Michigan State University, I settled into the same duplicitous pattern I was so well versed in, but this time, it backfired—big time. Apparently, you can't have Bible studies on the same dorm floor where the girl you are trying to score with lives. My freshman year was a complete and utter waste. I crashed and burned academically, financially, relationally, and spiritually. I was one of the youngest people to become a leader in the campus ministry I was part of and, just as notably, one of the fastest booted off the team for living an immoral lifestyle.

The summer between my first and second freshmen years, I went to Africa on a mission trip that also served as a convenient way to escape the wrath of my dad when my grade reports, parking tickets, and credit-card statements arrived. That summer, I determined to crack open the Bible to read the thing for myself. This time, I wasn't just going to read a verse here and a verse there. I wanted to know what it really meant to be a Christian and what the church was supposed to look like. I decided that I would read

every word of the New Testament and log what I found. What I discovered on those pages was Jesus, and He blew my mind. He was radical and demanded everything of His followers. He didn't just die on the cross, but He asked His followers to pick up their own crosses and follow Him (Matt. 16:24). He talked a little bit about heaven (Matt. 6:19–21; John 14:2) and a lot about hell (Matt. 13:41–42, 49–50; Mark 9:43). I'm not sure if this is when I truly placed my faith in Jesus or if it was one of the dozen times before, but this time it stuck. I knew it stuck because from that point forward, I felt guilty about *everything*.

I pretty quickly went back to my vice and continued to date around until a non-Christian girl I was treating way too casually called me out on my hypocrisy. Yes, you read that right; my non-Christian fling told me I wasn't living as a Christian should. And I knew it too! Every time we went out, my conscience would flare up and I would fight to keep the Holy Spirit in check.

I was free, but I sure didn't feel free. Now that I was back to my so-called perfect double life, I found that I felt really bad about it. Somehow freedom didn't taste as good as I thought it would. The problem was that I was living a counterfeit freedom, like bacon-flavored toothpaste.

There was no joy in my sin, and I felt trapped.

That's when I stumbled onto the same verse that tripped up Kate in our small group: "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). As respectfully as I can say it, this initially sounded like a bunch of bull. Freedom? I felt freer before I started taking my faith seriously! Was I missing something? And it wasn't as though I

could ask anyone about it, because it seemed like everyone I knew had it together.

Little did I know, they were thinking the same thing about me. That's why I often refer to myself as a "recovering hypocrite." Perhaps others will be able to look at my life and realize they don't need to fake it anymore either. We are in this together, desperately trying to figure what freedom in Christ really means.

## THE BIG QUESTION

Full disclosure time.

The reason I am writing this book is because I have heard variations of the same question time and time again, from the church lobby to the hotel bar: "If Jesus has set us free, why aren't we?"

At the risk of sounding condescending, have you read the verse I keep quoting? Really read it? Slowly? Every single word?

For freedom Christ has set us free. (Gal. 5:1)

In this short verse, the apostle Paul is arguing that Jesus Christ has set us free and the whole point of our freedom is ... wait for it ... freedom! If this is true (and it is), freedom ought to be one of the defining marks of a follower of Jesus. Just like my wedding ring tells the world I am married, freedom should tell the world I am Christian.

When Paul wrote these words, he was writing to Christians who were facing a specific false teaching. They were being told that

the way you could identify a true Christian was the same way you could identify a Jew: they were circumcised. The false teachers' argument was simple: "No circumcision? No Jesus." Paul took these guys to task (too late for some of his readers who had rushed out to get a quick snip) and taught emphatically that a Christian's marking was not a physical one but a spiritual one. The way you could identify a Christian was that he was free!

Freedom was the reason Jesus came to earth (Matt. 1:23–25), lived a sinless life (1 Pet. 2:22), died on the cross (Luke 23:46), was buried (vv. 52–53), rose again (24:6), and ascended into heaven (v. 51). He did it all to set the captives free (4:18). Even more astonishing was that the reason Jesus set us free was so we would actually be free!

*No freedom? No Jesus!*

Paul's entire argument in Galatians is that freedom is both the means and the end of the Christian life. It's what we get and what we become. It's who we are because of Jesus. We are free!

## **DON'T LET ANYONE STEAL YOUR FREEDOM**

Because both the means and the end of the Christian life is freedom, because freedom is the reason Jesus came, Paul uses incredibly strong language to talk about a proper response to those who try to steal Christians' freedom from them: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

“Stand firm” is a military term that is brilliantly illustrated in the movie *300*. In one iconic scene, the Spartans line up shield to shield in a small crevice while an opposing army that vastly outnumbers them thunders toward their position. Knowing a mass of humanity is about to crash into them, they stand firm. Leonidas, the king of Sparta, yells, “Hold!” When their front line is hit, it is hit hard, but the soldiers stand firm.

That’s precisely what Paul is commanding those who have been set free by Jesus. Our freedom is at stake, and there is a great opposing force that is hell bent on putting us back in chains. They will stop at nothing to make sure our faith feels like slavery. Paul, like a Spartan commander, declares, “Hold!”

But what is this overwhelming enemy in Paul’s imagery?

Is it the entirety of the Roman Empire? No. It’s a much stronger force.

Is it sin? Nope.

Is it Satan or his demons? Surprisingly, no.

Death? No. Death is no match for our freedom, for then we will be truly free forever.

What could it be?

The force that brutally opposes those who have been set free by Jesus is other so-called Christians, specifically those who claim to follow Jesus but try to enslave the very people Jesus has set free.

When faced with this foe, Paul commands, “Stand firm and do not submit to a yoke of slavery.” What is a yoke of slavery? Paul’s early readers would have been familiar with two definitions of *yoke*.

The first was a set of rules established by a rabbi. The idea was simple. Sin is bad, and people should stay as far away from it as possible. Therefore, to keep people from sin, they should stay away from anything that might tempt them to sin. But some teachers didn't stop there. They wanted to make sure people stayed away from anything that might tempt them to be tempted to sin. And on and on the rule creation would go. Jewish teachers would become known for these symbolic fences they built around the Law, and their new sets of rules would be known as their "yoke."

The second type of yoke was a device a farmer would place between a weak animal and a strong one to keep the weaker in line. When you combine the two definitions, the message of these false teachers is clear: "You are a weak animal. You know what you should do and you don't do it. You know, as a follower of Jesus, your standard is His life and teaching. You know you cannot plow in a straight line no matter how hard you try." The solution they had to this problem was a yoke, complete with rules and regulations that went above and beyond Scripture, that they would place around people's necks to keep them in line.

## **WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH YOKES ANYWAY?**

I am a die-hard Apple user, and I wrote the first draft of this manuscript on my trusty MacBook using Apple Pages. Unfortunately, my publisher uses Microsoft Word. Therefore, in violation of my conscience, I had to convert everything over. While I was

begrudgingly installing the Microsoft Office Suite and figuring out how to use it, this message popped up in the tutorial: “Freedom can be scary without structure.”

Microsoft just perfectly described why Christians struggle with their freedom. We are afraid. We don't have control. We structure our spiritual lives in such a way that we can monitor and measure how we are doing and, presumably, how God feels about us at any given moment.

Take our prayer lives, for example. We all know that prayer is important and that we should pray. We've heard the sermons and the stories of “prayer warriors” like my own mom, who dedicates days to prayer and once went from full-time to part-time work so she could pray more. Yet most Christians I have met would tell you their prayer lives are atrocious. It's not that we don't want to pray. We really do.

So what do we do? We create a structured prayer life.

We download an app that tracks prayer requests, and we commit to praying every day. Usually, we do great for several days, but then we miss one. And what is our reaction to our forgetfulness? We beat ourselves up—not because we didn't pray, but because we didn't follow our man-made prayer structure. Our attempt to pray ends up making us feel worse about our prayer lives.

What about reading the Bible? As Christians, we know the Bible is how God communicates with us, and most of us have, at one time or another, made a commitment to read it every day. But then we miss a day and we feel God is disappointed with us and will not help us with anything that day. We are on our own for

the next twenty-four hours because of our massive failure of not reading a few verses before breakfast.

Now, is a prayer app a bad thing? No! I have one and use it (sort of). Is a Bible-reading plan a bad thing? I hope not—our church has one, and we encourage people to use it. The problem occurs when our man-made rules become more important than Jesus—when praying or reading the Bible every day becomes more important than following Jesus. But wait, aren't they the same thing? No!

The Word of God is essential, but until the printing press was invented in 1440, most people didn't have their own copy. They couldn't read it every day even if they wanted to. Does that mean the Christians who lived before 1440 were lesser Christians than we are?

What about prayer? We should certainly pray—we are even told to “pray continually” (1 Thess. 5:17 NIV)—but there are no commands in Scripture about precisely how that is to play out in our lives. And if you are tempted to just repeat the Lord's Prayer over and over, remember that Jesus Himself slammed rote, robotic prayers in Matthew 6.

The problem with yokes is that they go beyond the point of where Scripture goes and demand more than Scripture demands. They place chains on our souls, and then, in a deadly twist, the rules we come up with become the measuring stick of our faith and how we think God feels about us. When we fail at our rules, we don't feel free.

That doesn't mean we aren't free. *It just means that even though you cannot lose your freedom, you can lose feeling free.*

## OUR MISERABLE FAITH

Have you ever noticed that so many Christians seem miserable? I'm not talking about the fake smiles they plaster on their faces when they pull into the church parking lot. I mean the real them they put on when they drive away. It's not just the churchgoers who don't feel free either. I know solid Christians who are miserable. They think of all that Jesus did for them; they imagine the torture He endured, the crown of thorns jammed onto His head, and the spear thrust into His side. The brutality and humiliation of the cross makes them think, *The least I can do to pay Jesus back is ...* And that's where things go sideways. We think we have to pay at least a little of the price for our salvation or at least have something in our lives to show for it.

We want something to tell the world "I am a Christian," and we think we have to manufacture it somehow. We want a marking.

Paul says we already have one. "For freedom Christ has set us free."

So why don't we feel free?

Maybe the first problem is we don't even know what freedom is from a biblical perspective. As Americans, we think we have a corner on freedom, living in the land of the free and all. But because we look at freedom from the narrow perspective of our political landscape, we think of it as one of our "rights."

Recently, both guns and gay marriage have been in the news. Gun owners demand the right to keep and carry firearms, and gay couples demand the right to marry whomever they wish, and these

two issues give a glimpse into our definition of freedom. For us, *free is all about me*. Let me say it a different way: we think being free means being left alone to do whatever we want. Bruce Ware, in his book *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, reminds us:

Freedom is not what our culture tells us it is. Freedom is *not* my deciding, from the urges and longings of my sinful nature, to do *what* I want to do, *when* I want to do it, *how* I want to do it, *with whom* I want to do it. According to the Bible, that is bondage, not freedom.<sup>1</sup>

It's like all of those disgusting bacon-related, non-bacon imitations. They have a baconesque flavor, but they aren't bacon!

The problem is that we carry this faulty definition of freedom into the Bible, and things get sticky because that's not what Paul is talking about when he says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." It's so much bigger and better.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Describe when you first experienced freedom. What was your first taste like? Was it delicious, scandalous, or scary? Or have you never experienced it at all?

Do you relate to Kate in her doubt of God's approval? Or to the author's description of himself as a "recovering hypocrite"?

When you think of the Christians you know, is freedom one of their defining characteristics? Is it for you?

Would you say your spiritual walk feels more like freedom or slavery?

What are some of the “yokes” or structures that you’ve created in your life or that you’ve felt are necessary to adhere to? How has applying these to your life worked out?

Discuss our culture’s definition of freedom and how that compares to the biblical definition. How are they the same? How are they different?