

LIBERATING

KING

BREAKING FREE
FROM THE TYRANNY OF SIN

STEPHEN MILLER



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2016 by Stephen Miller

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8010-0683-8

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

The author is represented by the literary agency of Wolgemuth & Associates, Inc.

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



Stephen Miller, Liberating King
Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2016. Used by permission.
(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)

To my wife, Amanda,
and our five kids, Kinsey, Keira, Jude, Liam, and Ethan.
May our eyes always stay fixed on Jesus
as we walk together with him.

In memory of Ronnie Smith,
the impact of whose life
will ripple into eternity.

Contents

- Acknowledgments 9
- Introduction 11
1. Encountering the Truth: How the Liberating King Frees Us from the Bondage of Lies 15
 2. When Sorrows like Sea Billows Roll: How the Liberating King Frees Us to Suffer Well 29
 3. Someone Greater Than the Storm: How the Liberating King Frees Us from Freak-Outs 41
 4. Learning to Be Brave: How the Liberating King Frees Us to Walk by Faith When Our World Is Unraveling 49
 5. Death to the Approval Vampire: How the Liberating King Frees Us to Love Others 61
 6. Moving Beyond Warm Fuzzies: How the Liberating King Frees Us to Join His Mission 73

Contents

7. The Noise of Our Songs: How the Liberating King Frees Us to Act Justly 83
 8. The Majesty We Long to Behold: How the Liberating King Frees Us from the Misconception That the World Revolves around Us 93
 9. Ten Looks at Jesus: How the Liberating King Frees Us from the Cycle of Sin 103
 10. Hope Not Based on Hype: A Foretaste of the Glory to Come 113
- Notes 123

Acknowledgments

TO MY WIFE, AMANDA. Thank you for your support, encouragement, and patience that helped me finish this, and for always pointing me to Jesus.

To my kids, Kinsey, Keira, Jude, Liam, and Ethan. You each inspire me and bring so much joy to my life.

To my parents, Ann Goodner and Lee Miller. Thank you for giving me life and supporting all my crazy ideas over the years.

To my other parents, Charles and Sonii Nagel. Thank you for taking me in like I was your own and giving me your daughter.

To my band, Taylor Webb, Ryan Rich, and Mason Terry. Thank you for the countless hours you have spent with me on the road and at our home church, selflessly serving others to bring glory to Jesus. And thank you for the months of driving me everywhere so that I could finish this book.

To Charlie Harrisberger, Matt Carter, Neil McClendon, Jim Frith, Tom Mosley, Darrin Patrick, J. R. Vassar, Bob

Acknowledgments

Kauflin, and Paul Baloché. I cannot tell you how much your mentorship over the years continues to shape me as a man and minister.

To my leadership team at Rooted Network—Glenn Packiam, Courtney Peebles, Lauren Chandler, and Andi Rozier. I am so grateful for your passion to equip and encourage worship leaders.

To Matt Boswell, Michael Bleecker, Mike Cosper, Aaron Ivey, Robbie Seay, Charlie Hall, Matt Papa, and Zac Hicks. Your friendship has been such an ongoing encouragement to me to keep growing deeper in my understanding of worship and love for Christ, his Word, and his church.

To Matt and Sara Harms. Thank you for letting me tell the story of you and Ava. Your faith has been such an inspiration to me and your lives have led me in worship so well over the last few years.

To Anita Smith. Thank you for your deep love for Jesus and for letting me tell the story of you and Ronnie. I can't think of a higher honor. Amanda and I have been deeply impacted by you both, and I can't wait until we get to celebrate together in heaven.

To my agent, Erik Wolgemuth. Thank you so much for helping me take this book from concept to completion and for believing in it so much!

To my editor, Brian Thomasson. Thank you for the hours spent helping me refine this and making it better than it would have been on my own.

To the amazing people at Baker Publishing. Thank you for investing in this book, that by God's grace he might use it to set many free with the liberating power of Christ.

Introduction

WHEN I RUN INTO A PROBLEM, I want to know the steps I need to take in order to pull myself up by my bootstraps and fix whatever is wrong. I love to think that ultimately I fixed the problem. I overcame by my strength and ingenuity. I earned whatever reward resulted.

Maybe you can relate to that.

The problem with this line of thinking is that it is completely false. You and I can't fix ourselves. In fact, we are probably the reason the problem exists in the first place. We were never designed to be our own savior, and trying to be will only drive us farther into the pit of despair. Like standing in quicksand—the harder we try to escape, the deeper we sink.

This book, despite its promise of helping you break free from the tyranny of sin, is not a self-help guide. I will not be telling you all the answers or giving you the twelve easy steps to a better you.

I am going to be very vulnerable with you. There is no sense in acting like I have it all together. I don't. I don't have

the answers. In fact, I wrote every word on the pages that follow as a reminder to myself.

Despite being liberated from the power of sin, I find myself time and again running back to it. Just like Lot's wife, looking back toward Sodom. Like the Israelites constantly grumbling that they were better off staying in Egypt. I am a man who walks the high wire of faithfulness, and I'm not very good at it. In fact, I'm terrible. Falling off, repenting, getting back up. Falling off, repenting, getting back up. Falling off, repenting, getting back up. Rinse, repeat.

It's all quite discouraging sometimes. As I walk in this world, I am constantly bombarded with lies. I start to question who God has said I am and what he has told me to do. I was made to be a worshiper of God, but sin has so distorted the direction of my affection that my worship sometimes looks like a drunk driver being asked to walk the line for a sobriety test. I want to walk straight, to worship the one true God, but I keep turning to the right and the left and stumbling over my own feet.

Jesus says that he is the Truth, his Word is truth, that the Spirit of Truth lives in me, and that the truth sets me free. But sometimes I don't feel very free. I feel more like I'm in bondage. I feel broken.

It was from that place of brokenness, overwhelmed with discouragement at how slowly my sanctification seemed to be going, that I began to cry out for God to rescue me. I was following Jesus, but in the midst of an incredibly difficult season of life, I seemed to be losing the battle with doubt and pride.

That summer, I was leading worship at a student event in Santa Fe, surrounded by mountains on every side. I decided

to take an afternoon of solitude. In hindsight it might not have been the best idea to go for a hike into the wilderness all by myself, but I climbed to the top of the highest peak I could see and began to cry out to God.

As I looked out over mile after mile of breathtaking majesty, it began to sink in that Jesus was using this difficult time to set me free. That all this struggle and strife was his gift to help me see the truth that he was there with me all along, a Liberating King at work on my heart, committed to delivering me from my bondage.

And there from that mountain, the words that would become my song “Liberating King” began to flow from my lips:

There is no other in heaven and earth
Who’s strong enough to save
No other God or King would ever lay his own life
down
There’s no one higher
The one who bowed low has taken up his crown
Our Liberating King, the one to set us free has
come.¹

Jesus is here. He is with us. He is for us. He is in us. He is our only hope. Because Christ has come, made himself low, died in our place, and defeated sin and death, we *can* be free.

This book is for broken people like me. People who need a hope that is bigger than self-help. People who need a Savior who is stronger than themselves. People who need to stop believing the lies that surround them and start believing the truth.

If you’re perfect, then you really don’t need to keep reading. But if you, like me, find yourself day after day in need of a Savior to liberate you, then read on.

Introduction

What I'm going to say here isn't really original. It comes from God's Word. I'm simply going to point to that light and let him expose the lies of our culture that seek to enslave us and illuminate the truth that sets us free.

I trust that his voice is loud enough to cut through all the noise.

1

Encountering the Truth

HOW THE LIBERATING KING FREES US
FROM THE BONDAGE OF LIES

If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

John 8:31–36

Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

John 14:6

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

2 Corinthians 3:17

A FEW YEARS BACK I was invited to lead worship for a church's weekend services and gladly accepted, but I had no idea what I was getting myself into. On the whole the church was fantastic—incredibly welcoming and friendly, with an obvious love for Jesus and passion for worshipping him.

As we began to sing songs of praise and adoration, I couldn't help but notice a woman on the right side of the room, practicing what looked to be some sort of pantomimed samurai ninja sword fighting. It became very hard to focus on what I was there to do, and it seemed that the people I was trying to lead were having a difficult time with the distraction as well. Everyone had all but stopped singing and was staring at this woman, who seemed to be intensely engaged in the heat of some sort of imaginary battle.

When the service ended, I walked over to her as quickly as I could, curious to see what her actions were all about.

Beaming with pride and speaking with a thick southern accent, she said, "This room is at war, and I was in spiritual battle with the evil spirits over the souls of all these people. Pretty sure we won."

I had no words. I just stood there with what had to look like a bewildered, sheepish grin on my face.

That moment goes down in my book as one of the top three weirdest things I have experienced in church. And yet there is some truth there. There is a war raging all around us, and one of its most effective weapons is distraction.

Have you ever been in a room desperately trying to focus on the conversation you're having with the person right in front of you but instead finding yourself distracted by all the sights and sounds around you? It's hard to pay attention to

what really matters because so much noise is drowning it out. It can be incredibly frustrating.

But isn't that the world we live in? It seems we can scarcely go one hour without the world whispering into our ears, appealing to our sin-sick hearts and distracting us from what really matters.

Advertisements and billboards fill our sight lines while radio commercials fill our ears. Television shows and music tell us what we need to have and who we need to be.

The grocery store checkout aisle bombards us with magazine covers that show us how we should look, what kind of sex we should be having and how often we should be having it, what kind of vacations we should take, what our homes should look like, and what food should be served in those homes.

Social media reminds us that despite our best efforts, we aren't successful enough, fit enough, or crafty enough; our lives are not "share-able," "retweet-able," or "pin-able" enough. We don't quite measure up to how things "should" be.

Little by little, day after day, these subtle and not-so-subtle messages creep into our hearts. They shape the way we see the world. They captivate our thinking.

If I only had _____, I would be happy—and I deserve to be happy.

If I only made more money, I wouldn't have to worry so much.

If only my spouse understood me (or, if only I were married), I wouldn't struggle with loneliness.

If I could just get that job or promotion, I would be fulfilled.

But these are all lies that were expertly engineered to enslave you and me, deftly designed for our destruction. Let's take a step back for a moment and logically examine how absurd these lies are.

If having that “thing” is the *only* thing that will make us happy, then not having it will only make us miserable.

If getting the promotion is the *only* way we can truly be fulfilled, then not getting it means we are doomed to frustrated discontent.

If only we could look beyond the flowery marketing of consumerism, peel back the facade of idolatry, and see the effect of these hollow promises and false hopes on our hearts.

You and I weren't made for these kinds of subpar desires and dreams, and we certainly weren't remade for them. This is not how things are supposed to be.

Yet this is the room we're sitting in, desperately trying to focus on the God right in front of us who is promising us freedom and satisfaction while we are distracted by the sparkling allure of the world's false promises that ultimately lead to bondage and discontent. How do we choose wisely and walk in the promise of freedom that has been offered to us in Christ? How do we fight for our own joy and satisfaction?

The truth is, knowing how illogical and unhelpful something is will not keep us from choosing it over and over again.

Knowing that porn will only bring emptiness and guilt will not keep the porn addict from choosing to stare at a screen night after night. Knowing that the hyper-photoshopped cover model is impossible to emulate will not keep a woman from choosing to go deeply into debt buying clothes, makeup,

surgeries, personal trainers, and more. She needs a vision of something more beautiful and lovely.

We all do.

Our gaze must be fixed on something better and more excellent, something that will never be found lacking. This is why Paul tells us in Philippians 4:8 that if we want the true peace that comes with freedom in Christ, we should think on whatever is excellent, noble, just, lovely, pure, and honorable. He is commending us to be set free from the anxiety of trusting in things and people by trusting in the one who made everything and rules over all!

There is a difference between logic and truth. Logic speaks to your intellect. Truth speaks to your soul. Solid logic may free you up in many ways, but it will never be powerful enough to set you free. Only truth can do that. In worship, you interact with the truth in the most practical, life-changing way possible.

I have had the immeasurable joy of leading worship in the church for sixteen years now. There are few things that bring me more delight than getting to lead the people of God to sing the praises of God in the presence of God. In fact, it is so fulfilling to me that it's difficult to think in terms of worship without thinking of music and singing. Certainly worship is much more than songs, and I could likely fill an entire book talking about what worship is and isn't. But for the sake of clarity, I will define worship here as "our entire life's response to God's character and actions."

You and I are always worshipping—when our church gathers to sing and when our family gathers around the dinner table. When we are driving down the freeway, working hard at our jobs, or caring for the poor, we are worshipping.

Nonetheless, I believe some forms of worship lead to a more intentional lifestyle of worship. The form of worship I will focus on in this book is the intentional discipline of silencing the competing voices all around us in order to ground our hearts in Christ's freedom by rehearsing the truth of God's Word, being filled with the truth by God's Spirit, and encountering the Truth himself (Jesus).

Rehearsing the Truth

I've learned that there's a profound difference between knowing something with my head and knowing it with my heart.

I am the king of multitasking. I can be talking to my wife while watching a show on television, texting on my phone, checking Twitter on my iPad, and keeping up with the game on my laptop. At the end of the night, I could probably give you a general rundown of all that went on, but did I truly experience any of it? No! I passively let a bunch of information happen to me, rather than actively participating in a meaningful way.

Similarly, worship is not passively going through the motions of quickly thinking good, logical thoughts about God. It is rehearsing the truth of God's Word; actively meditating on it and letting it sink into and shape the innermost core of our being—our hearts. It is replacing all the messages of the world with the good news of who God is, what he has done, and who we are in light of that.

This discipline naturally forces the direction of our gaze Godward and changes the way we see the world in light of his glory. Our meditations shape our motivations.

All of a sudden, even the most mundane of tasks has new meaning.

All of a sudden, nothing is ever quite as bad as it seems.

Think about it. If you know in your heart that God is perfect, all his ways are perfect, and every good and perfect gift comes from him, then when he tells you something, you can trust that it is true and right and just. He will not deceive you. All he has told you and me is for our good, and there is no area of our lives where God's goodness is removed.

When someone else gets the recognition we long for and we're tempted to give in to the sin of envy and comparison, we can worship, saying, "God is good and he does good. He has me where I am right now for a reason, and I can trust him when he gives and when he takes away."

As we worship, we remember that God is completely sovereign, completely powerful, and completely in control. Nothing in this world can happen apart from his will. Nothing catches him off guard, slips through his fingers, or forces his hand.

So when our world is spinning out of control and we are tempted to try to control everything or weep with desperation, we can worship, saying, "God is powerful and sovereign. He is in control right now, so I don't have to be. I can trust him."

As we worship, we remember that God is love and he is loving. In fact, the truest word for love is *Jesus*. He is the most perfect, purest demonstration of love in all of history. His steadfast love will endure forever. It will never fail us and it will never bail on us.

So when we feel rejected or unloved and are tempted to numb the pain with food, porn, alcohol, and more, or when

we feel the need to project an inflated, more lovable image to the world, instead we can worship. We can say, “God has created me in his image, purchased me with his blood, and adopted me into his family. I have value and worth because I am loved by God.”

Jesus teaches us to approach God in worship not as outsiders but as adopted children of a loving Father (Matt. 6:9). The implications of this great truth are impossible to exaggerate.

If God is good, sovereign, loving, and he’s my Father, then I have no need to worry. I have no need to envy, compare, be anxious, or be in control. I have no need to look to sin to give me hope, satisfaction, worth, or value. I have all I need in Christ, who is my life.

As we worship God, we are rehearsing the great, unshakable truths of God’s Word, and the power of sin begins to lose its grip on our lives. The power of a newer, greater affection replaces the old ones that once held us in captivity, and we are set free.

Filled with the Truth

When I speak of meditation, it’s important to understand exactly what I’m talking about. I don’t mean the Eastern mysticism practice of emptying our minds. On the contrary, I mean the exact opposite. When we worship, we are not only emptying our minds of what is false, we are also filling our minds with the excellent majesty and glory of God’s truth.

Yet if I were to tell you that the way out of bondage to sin is simply to “think happy thoughts,” you would look at me like I was crazy. This isn’t Neverland. There is no magic

pixie dust to help us fly away from our problems if we just think happy thoughts.

I can't think of a more hopelessly cruel thing than to tell you that if you want to be liberated from sin, you just need to accumulate true thoughts that you can intellectually process for long periods of time.

There must be more to what's prescribed in the Scriptures as the way to relentlessly put to death all of our sinful desires.

We must be filled with the Spirit.

To empty ourselves of all that would keep us in bondage, we must offer up our whole lives to be filled with the liberating power of God's Spirit, the person of God whose very presence brings us freedom (2 Cor. 3:17).

When we worship, we are somehow mysteriously filled with the truth in the presence of the Holy Spirit. He is the Spirit of Truth who guides us in truth and shows us what is true about God and ourselves.

Worship invites the Spirit to engage the projector of our imaginations and display the glory of God in living color on the screen of our hearts. As we gaze upon the beauty and holiness of God in worship, we cannot help but see how unlike him we are. Our sins are brought to light by his voice of conviction, and we are compelled to dethrone all idols and exalt the one true God to his rightful place upon the throne of our hearts.

The Spirit that fills us illuminates the Scriptures to our hearts so that we can understand them, and he empowers us to live in obedience to them. He shows us what is true and what is not.

In the movie *Catch Me If You Can*, Leonardo DiCaprio plays a con man named Frank Abagnale, an expert at writing

fraudulent checks. Frank mastered the art of forging checks so effectively that even the banks couldn't tell the difference between what was real and what was false. In the end, he was caught, and the FBI turned to Frank's expertise to help catch other forgers. Because Frank was keenly able to detect the truth and the lie, he was uniquely qualified to act as a counselor to help the FBI see the difference.

There is a master forger out there. He has been at the game a lot longer than we can imagine, and he has gotten really good at what he does. He is called the Father of Lies because he has so twisted the world we live in that the truth looks like the lie and the lie looks like the truth. He is constantly throwing counterfeit gods at us, enticing us with false hope that he expects will keep us in chains, and our hearts are so sick with sin that we have a hard time telling the difference.

But the Holy Spirit is an expert counselor who not only *shows* us the truth but also *fills* us with truth. When we worship, he opens the eyes of our hearts to see the hopelessly empty lies as well as the gloriously liberating truth of the gospel that we might be set free.

Encountering the Truth

I'm captivated by the story in Luke 8 about the man who had been tormented by demons for years. The seemingly indomitable power that possessed and oppressed him had him shackled to a state of desperate agony. But when the Truth showed up, the lie was made painfully obvious. When Jesus came on the scene, everything changed.

The demons who before had seemed so fierce and untamable all of a sudden start cowering like puppies with their tails between their legs, begging Jesus not to torment them the way they had tormented the man.

Talk about total dominance. This is what true power looks like. Jesus doesn't have to say or do anything. They know about him. He has a reputation. He is the King of all, who created all things and rules over all things. These demons are right to be afraid.

Jesus sets the man free from the oppression of the demons and gives him hope for a new life that he could have never dreamed of before.

This is the power of the presence of God. Even demons quake in their boots when he shows up. The captive is set free. The impossible becomes possible.

In the movie *Braveheart*, the Scottish people are led by William Wallace to fight for their freedom against the tyrannical reign of England. At one point, a squadron of English soldiers chases down a couple of Scottish scouts until their backs are up against the wall. Confidently the soldiers shout out, "You're outnumbered and trapped! Now where's Wallace?"

The situation looks dire. Any onlooker would advise them to give up.

Yet right when it seems things can't get uglier for the scouts, a rock comes flying from above, pegging the cocky soldier in the head. The camera pans up and there stands Wallace with a sly look on his face, waving, his band of soldiers surrounding him. There is no contest. Wallace's crew makes light work of the English, and they continue their fight for freedom.

This is what Jesus does for us. No matter how dire the situation looks, the truth remains that the cameras will soon pan up and our hero will be standing there, ready to save the day. His reputation precedes him as a dominating warrior triumphant over sin and death. He has won and he will win. End of story.

You and I are plagued by our own “demons,” pursued by the enemy until our backs are up against a wall. We can feel tormented, shackled, and powerless.

Perhaps you’re experiencing inescapable guilt from past failures, or debilitating condemnation over the habitual sins you struggle with even now. Maybe you have been sinned against and can’t move on from bitterness into forgiveness. Maybe you can’t stop comparing yourself to others, and as a result, you feel you will never be good enough to be used by God for anything significant.

These lies torment and enslave us. We need the Truth to show up and make everything right, to come on the scene and put all the lies to flight.

God has given us himself. This means that just as he is not a one-dimensional God, the freedom he gives is not one-dimensional freedom. It is an ever-increasing, ever-deepening, all-encompassing liberty that will help us not only finish strong but run the race of this life with joy and satisfaction.

He set us free so that the Spirit could produce the fruit of that freedom in our lives. We can love deeper, overflowing with profound happiness that isn’t based on our circumstances but on his incomprehensible and ever-present peace and patience. We are free to impact the world around us with his supernatural kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

This isn’t some cute saying. It’s foundational. When Jesus calls himself the Truth, he is saying, “I’m here to set you free from the bondage of lies.” When he says, “I am the way,” it means more than, “If you come with me, you’ll get to go to heaven.” Jesus is our way out and our way in! Out of bondage, into freedom. Not freedom to do whatever we want, but freedom to live a life worth living. It is a life with Christ at the center, as the Sun that our entire world revolves around with the light of his glory exposing all the shoddy counterfeits and inferior forgeries that would keep us trapped in darkness.

We see this best when we come to him in worship. In worship, as we rehearse the truth of God’s Word and are filled with the truth by his Spirit, we are also encountering the Truth himself in the person of Jesus. He is our perfect High Priest and Mediator who takes us boldly before the throne of God, where he is seated with power in the heavens.

The great mystery of this is that God infinitely occupies all time and space. Heaven is his throne, the earth his footstool. There is nowhere we can go to escape from him. And yet as we ground our worship fully in the truth of God’s Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus chooses to meet with us in a unique way and take us into the presence of the Father.

No lie can stand in his presence and not be seen for what it is. No chain can remain on us when our eyes are fixed intently on the Liberating King in worship. When Jesus—the Truth himself—shows up, everything changes.

We are set free.

Questions for Application and Discussion

1. What are some of the lies that you believe about God, yourself, and the world? What does God's unchanging word of truth have to say about it? Open a Bible right now and begin to remind yourself of what is true.
2. What are the areas of ongoing struggle in your life? Where do you need to be set free? How could worshiping the Liberating King set you free in these specific areas?
3. What can you intentionally do to silence the noise of your life and consistently get alone in order to rehearse the truth, actively be filled with truth, and encounter the Truth? What times of day work best? Make a plan. Schedule it as you would your workout, mealtime, or meetings.