



**The
Ultimate
Exodus**

**Finding Freedom
from What
Enslaves You**

DANIELLE STRICKLAND

This isn't a book with information and steps in it. It's a book about the power of love to set us free. Danielle doesn't just talk about this in books; she lives it out on the streets. This book won't make you want to be like Danielle—it will make you want to be like Jesus.

BOB GOFF

New York Times bestselling author of *Love Does*

If you're searching and longing for freedom in your life, find someone who knows what it feels like to be free, and lives it. Find someone who understands that freedom is not a cheap quick fix and that it's often hard, sacrificial, and disciplined. Find someone who's failed and gotten up again, with skin in the game and scars to prove it. Someone who is compassionate enough to love you where you're at but challenging enough to not let you stay there. Find someone who can't stop working toward setting people free because she has discovered the kind of good news too good not to share. Danielle offers us all this and more in *The Ultimate Exodus*.

Get the book, and get back on your journey—to freedom.

JO SAXTON

Cohost of *Lead Stories Podcast* and board chair of 3D Movements

In *The Ultimate Exodus*, Danielle Strickland reminds us that God invades our ordinary, everyday lives in ways that lead us closer to true freedom. She knows this, of course, because she's experienced that liberty in real ways most of

us can only imagine. As she retells some of the ways God has led her from the edge to an exodus, we are reminded again that life is more than just one Red Sea crossing.

REGGIE JOINER

Founder and CEO of Orange

The Ultimate Exodus effervesces with Danielle Strickland's characteristic passion, compassion, and clarity. It addresses some of the most pressing, pervasive, and personal issues of our time, unlocking freedom and greater joy for us all.

PETE GREIG

Bestselling author, pastor, and founder of 24-7 Prayer

This is a book about getting free and becoming a real and an honest-to-goodness follower of God—disciplined, focused, evangelizing, praying, serving, sabbathing, giving, and believing. And because I know Danielle Strickland, I can say that it's also written by one. You simply must read it.

MICHAEL FROST

Author of *Surprise the World*

Danielle Strickland gives off the fragrance of Jesus. And in *The Ultimate Exodus*, she reminds us that Jesus came not just to make bad people good but to set oppressed people free and bring dead people back to life. It's a beautiful book.

SHANE CLAIBORNE

Author, activist, "red-letter" Christian, and recovering sinner

It's common to find a book that would be good for someone you know. It's rare to find a book that would be good for *everyone* you know. Simple, beautiful, and comprehensive, *The Ultimate Exodus* holds treasures of Danielle's life experiences, and the depth of her spiritual reflections is poetic and life changing. While *freedom* can be a buzzword, this journey through the central metaphor of Scripture is not only hopeful but also enlightening and deeply enthralling. Through *The Ultimate Exodus*, you will catch a glimpse of the beauty of God's love for his children and gain invaluable perspective on how to attain the freedom promised in Christ. This book is a gem.

KEN WYTSMA

Pastor, educator, and author of *The Grand Paradox* and *Create vs. Copy*

I'm a total Danielle Strickland fan. Not only is she one of the most outstanding speakers around today, but she's also a radical witness to Jesus and a good writer to boot. Danielle speaks with the authority of someone who lives out her message in the rough-and-tumble of life.

ALAN HIRSCH

Award-winning author on missional Christianity and leadership



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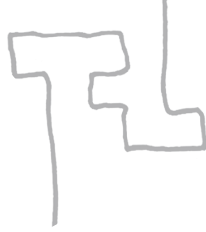
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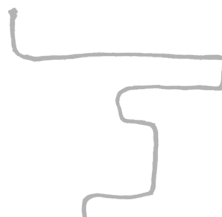
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Introduction

I WAS INCREDIBLY privileged to visit Haiti recently. I traveled there with Compassion International to meet up with my sponsor child and his mother. It was impacting in every way. You can imagine the mix of pain and joy as I heard the story of extreme poverty and its devastating consequences in the lives of this family I had become entwined with. I also celebrated the hope of a different future for a few of them through the faithfulness and strength of a local church offering a lifeline of resources. Hope and hardship work like this—almost in tandem with each other. Great celebration gives way to desperate feelings of powerlessness, and then back again to celebration. Like a great pendulum of the heart.

One of the things I was particularly interested in as I visited Haiti was its complex history of slavery and freedom. Haiti is the first black republic on the face of the earth. Seven hundred thousand Africans were taken and enslaved on this French colony in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They worked the plantations there to keep the most

profitable colony in history working smoothly—until one person got an idea, an idea that would change the world.

Of course it's more complicated than that, but at the same time, it's as simple as that: Someone in Haiti had the idea that these enslaved Africans weren't born to be slaves.

Just think about that for a minute. It is what we call a revolutionary idea.

Over a bit of time and talking and dreaming and plotting, some hard, cold statistics came to light, chief among them that slaves in Haiti outnumbered the slavers—by a *lot*. A revolution began, and it was bloody. Most historians agree it was one of the bloodiest revolutions in history. The French masters were roundly defeated, and the African slaves were now free. Well, kind of.

After an incredible uprising and a declaration of freedom for the people of Haiti, there began a complex and meandering story of exploitation and political unrest. Waves of injustice from without and within made the Haiti I eventually visited oppressed by slavery of many different flavors. Gone were the plantations, but still present was the poverty. Gone were the shackles and chains, but still present was systemic political corruption that kept people living in constant fear. Gone were the old colonial “masters,” but still present was the fastest growing crime in Haiti—child slavery. Former slaves were now slavers themselves. What happened?

What happened is what always happens, it seems: The same story is repeated in history over and over again. Slavery always returns. Oppression finds new forms, and people

become entangled in its web. To be liberated from slavery, it turns out, we must confront not just external realities but internal ones.

I was visiting a friend of mine who for years has been working with the poorest folks in Asia. She routinely sees women exiting the slavery that is the sex industry. I asked her about one particular woman I had met with that morning: “How long has she been free?”

My friend wisely answered, “She’s been out of the brothel for six months, but she’s still on the journey of freedom.” It takes only a few moments, my friend told me, for a woman to be freed from the room where she is held as a sex slave. But it can take many years to get the sex slavery out of the woman.

Freedom is a long-term work, and it often comes only from the inside out.

A little verse in the New Testament, Galatians 5:1, spells it out quite well: “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” (NIV). In other words, Jesus has created a way for us to experience freedom. Outside and in. Be free, and don’t be slaves again.

The warning Paul offers the Galatians is exceptionally prophetic. Slavery always returns, but it may return in different forms. Oppression has a thousand different colors. In the case of the Galatian church, the people were beginning to use religion itself as a form of slavery—and you don’t have to be around very long on this earth to know that religion

can be a harsh slave master. But then again, anything can be oppressive. Coffee can have the fresh taste of a morning pick-me-up, but a tragic story of capitalistic greed and blood may be woven into its blend. Wealth can be freeing, but the inner lives of many extremely wealthy people show signs of despair and destruction. So what is with this combo punch? Things that set free and oppress? Can slavery ever end? Can freedom ever come?

This book says yes. Slavery may always return, but freedom is bound to come. I'm an eternal optimist. I believe that freedom is every human being's birthright. By an eternal intention and a supernatural power, we were born to be free. God made us that way. It's the oldest origin story on earth: humanity made to be free.

Yet a story of slavery runs through the heart of each of us. Brokenness is the human condition, and in fact we tend to lean into oppression. Even the Bible warns us that once we are set free, we have to be on guard to avoid letting slavery back in.

That's some amazing advice. But how? How can we truly be set free—and then stay free? What does it look like to enter into a new way of living, a life free from oppression?

Thankfully there is a story that helps us with these questions. It's *the* story of freedom—the grand story of God's people, caught in oppression and needing to get free, and of God unleashing a course of events that sets them free and establishes them as a new nation under his leadership.

This story is not of the Disney variety. It's harsh and

truthful, full of the frustrations and realities of fighting for freedom in the midst of external and internal oppression. But to learn the freedom story of the people of God is to find the keys to our own freedom—the ultimate exodus, into freedom, from the inside out.

I pray you'll find some keys that unlock freedom for your life as you read this book.



The Exodus

A Quick Review

JUST TO BE SURE we are all on the same page, let's clarify what's meant by the story of the Exodus.

Exodus is a book in the Bible. In that book are the main elements of a larger story, extending through multiple Bible books, of God's people getting free from oppression. I recommend you read it.

The Exodus story includes the story of Moses, which has been the subject of many Hollywood productions. So if you'd rather watch a movie, there are a bunch to choose from. My kids like the animated film *The Prince of Egypt*. DreamWorks Pictures produced it. It has great music and tells the tale in ninety minutes—which, although entertaining and very moving, means it is not exactly accurate.

Speaking of inaccurate, *The Ten Commandments* is an oldie but a goodie. It stars Charlton Heston as Moses. Or, if you like it fresh, *Exodus: Gods and Kings* is a newer rendition, with Christian Bale in the lead role.

I shouldn't be too critical of these movie treatments, of

course, as this book itself is only scratching the surface of some potential lessons we can learn on our own way out of oppression. *Exodus* means “a going out”; the Exodus story has “exit” signs lit up all over the place. You can’t miss them once I’ve pointed them out. The reason they are lit up is the same reason Exodus made it into the Bible: It’s important to know the way out when you need it.

The story line of the Exodus is shared by individuals and a community. This shouldn’t surprise us. After all, our lives are all connected. The Exodus story starts not in the book of Exodus but in the book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible—the best stories are always too complicated to fit into one book—when Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. (To be fair to them, he seemed to be a bit of a pain.) Through an incredibly twisted story line, Joseph ends up second in command of Egypt, and because God speaks to him in dreams, he saves Egypt from famine and prospers Egypt’s economy. His whole family (the small beginnings of Israel—the people of God) is saved with Egypt.

Egypt’s Pharaoh invites Joseph’s family to live in Egypt (and benefit from the food that Joseph has managed to save). He gives them the land of Goshen—the finest land in all of Egypt for shepherding. Three hundred years later (that’s where the story picks up in the book of Exodus), a new Pharaoh doesn’t know Joseph or the story of the Israelites in Egypt. This Pharaoh feels threatened by the Israelites (ignorance is dangerous) because they have been blessed like rabbits and have kept multiplying over the centuries. Instead

of seeing them as successful friends, this Pharaoh views the Israelites as a potential enemy and begins to oppress them, making their lives hard with work and ordering midwives to kill all their baby boys.

Two midwives refuse to kill the babies. They let the boys live. This starts a revolution.

One specific baby who is saved from death is later adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh. This baby, named Moses, grows up in Pharaoh's palace.

There is a great song by Louis Armstrong called "Go Down, Moses." I recommend it. My youngest son recommends it too. It's a family favorite. My son's name is Moses, actually.

Character development is key to a good story, and Moses' personal story weaves in and out of the community story in the Exodus. Consider his life moments the close-ups in the movie.

Moses grows up, and at some point he observes an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave; he reacts violently and kills the Egyptian. He leaves Egypt as a fugitive and escapes to the desert, where he meets a community who become his family when he marries the chief's daughter. He becomes a shepherd in the desert.

The people of Israel cry out to God for deliverance. God hears them.

God appears to Moses in the desert through a burning bush. Moses hears God's call to him and responds.

God sends Moses to confront Pharaoh and deliver his

people from slavery. Pharaoh is not so keen. He is hard hearted and refuses to listen.

Moses listens to God and does what he says. It takes a long time and a lot of signs and wonders and talking and using a stick and praying and waiting—a long time and more than one person (Aaron and Miriam help Moses lead, for starters)—but the Israelites finally walk out of Egypt across the bottom of the Red Sea, which is miraculously parted for them to walk through and then released as the Egyptian army tries to bring them back. Boom.

The Israelites party hard and celebrate and build a monument and then start complaining because it dawns on them that they will most likely never survive the desert. Oh yeah—the desert again. Sense a theme?

The people of God spend forty years wandering around in the desert, learning how to represent God on earth and live a new way—not as slaves but as free people. It takes them a long time to get to the “Promised Land”—land they had been told in advance would be theirs. I’m hoping this book might help us all spend less time wandering around and more time living in freedom. God help us.



CHAPTER 1

Breathtaking Beauty

But the midwives had far too much
respect for God and didn't do
what the king of Egypt ordered;
they let the boy babies live.

EXODUS 1:17-18

WHEN MY YOUNGEST son was born, it was magical—not in the witchcraft kind of way but in the Walt Disney sort of tingles-down-your-spine, heaven-on-earth sort of way. Actually, if the truth be told (and why not tell it), I loved him before he was born. In the early ultrasound he looked a bit like a skeletal transformer, but even still, I loved him before we met.

Life and beauty are gifts. I'm not talking about the kind of beauty that is marketed and sold in bottles and formulas, but the kind that comes crying in a wrinkled and bloodied newborn body. Life in this most fragile form is a gift

to the world—a sign of something greater, bigger, deeper. I talk to people all the time—strong and scary people, people with scars and leather jackets and a lot of tattoos—who say that the birth of a baby took all their pain away. All their resentments left them as they held a six-pound bundle of skin and bones. A baby who can't do anything for itself somehow allowed them to experience the gift of life. It took their breath away.

When they tell me their stories, I understand. It's my story too. Perhaps you know what I mean. It's not always a newborn baby; the gift comes in kindness and goodness expressed everywhere. It's there in beauty and hope revealed through small acts of life every single day.

Life has power. Beauty has strength. It's quite remarkable when you think of it, and it's important to remember.

I remember a man who was an alcoholic for years. He was unwanted and rejected, regularly escorted out of towns by the police. He told me about being in detox, trying to get better but shaking and feeling so very sick as the alcohol was leaving his body. Sick and alone, that part of his life was a blur. But he remembers something very clearly: A lovely nurse sat with him and held his head in her lap, caressing his hair as a mother might have done, had he ever had a mother who loved him. He said he just wept. He wept in the lap of love. As he recalled the story, he couldn't remember the last time someone had touched him with kindness.

That kindness impacted him. It was powerful, a force of love. He told me his story years later as my supervisor in The

Salvation Army, a wonderful man of God who fought every day for others, trying to spread goodness to a dark and lonely world. He was an incredible example of what one life—and the power of kindness—can do in the world.

This is what I love about the Exodus. The story God tells of the deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt is a powerful one. It's not pretend or make-believe; it's dipped in the blood and guts of real life. The backdrop is almost entirely dark, actually, as though God understands better than anyone how difficult real life is. But the light and the power of beauty in it, the sheer force of love and goodness and truth, is mind-blowing. Kindness itself stands out against the dark backdrop with vivid, breathtaking intensity. In many ways the Exodus story is the story of life. It's the story of God's people being born. This story that begins in tragedy and slavery and bondage and fear is actually a story of birth and hope and kindness and beauty changing the world.

The Revolutionary Start

The Exodus didn't start when Moses stood before the Red Sea, waiting for it to part. It didn't start when Moses stood before Pharaoh, waiting for him to "let my people go." It didn't start when Moses stood before a burning bush or even when he stood over the body of an Egyptian slave driver he had just killed. Two women started the Exodus before Moses was even born.

Two women, in a world where women didn't really count

much. They weren't even Egyptian women—at least Egyptian women would have had some influence or power. But these were two simple Hebrew midwives. In the eyes of the world, their importance didn't really even register on a scale.

One day the raging and fearful king of Egypt, the Pharaoh whose name we don't know (the Bible's storyteller doesn't bother to mention it), asks these two Hebrew women to do something dark and horrible. He wants them to kill all the baby boys born to the Hebrews.

Now this is horrible in itself, but perhaps even more terrible to a people who have been taught the value of life. In the creation account of the Hebrews, people were valued not because of what they do, but because God created them. They are intrinsically valuable—just to be born is evidence of God declaring you *good*.

Pharaoh wouldn't have shared this worldview. For ancient Egyptians, people were functional. Women were property. Hebrew boys were a potential threat. I doubt Pharaoh's command was even very personal; evil rarely is. It was most likely a cold, rational decision: Hebrew baby boys were better off dead.

The Egyptian midwives of the time could possibly swallow Pharaoh's edict that these babies were unnecessary. And in fact our current culture can be convinced of reasons why children shouldn't be born. But ancient Hebrews could not. The Hebrew midwives knew something that the Egyptians didn't: They knew life was a gift. They knew babies don't come from storks, or the will of a man, or even the womb of

a woman. Babies come from God. Life, the Hebrews have always taught us, is a gift.

So these two women did something incredibly powerful. They said no. And make no mistake: Every revolutionary act begins with a no. When the most powerless group of people in society stood up to the most powerful, something happened. Time suspended, things slowed down, the world flipped upside-down even if for a brief moment, and everything changed. Because of their belief in God and beauty and life, because they were willing to take a risk and do the impossible thing, to do the right thing no matter what it cost, light came into an impossibly dark situation.

We know the names of those two women; the biblical record makes sure of it. Shiphrah and Puah. Pharaoh's name is not so clear, but then, what's special about a king being a tyrant? But Hebrew midwives standing up to a tyrant king? Now that is something special indeed. They are named in eternity because they defied a tyrant king to honor the King of life. And they let the boys live.

In that season, a little baby was born to parents who saw that he was beautiful, special, valuable—something every parent would see if they had the eyes to see it. That baby grew up to be an unlikely hero, Moses, who would lead the people of God from slavery to freedom—an Exodus so big the world is still talking about it! He was a deliverer, first delivered by two women who understood the breathtaking power of beauty in life.

In the story of God's people getting free, the value of life

is a central theme that I think would be irresponsible to miss. Shiphrah and Puah put their lives on the line for it. Moses' parents saw the value of their beautiful baby boy at his birth. Even Pharaoh's daughter, when she opened a basket floating on the Nile River and saw Moses' precious little face, understood that the power of life—the gift of it, the value of it—is a force. And now, when life is birthed, and the cry is heard, we are all reduced to tears—or maybe enlarged to tears, because the beauty of it unlocks something within us, and we weep in the lap of love. Touched by kindness. Breathtaking beauty.

This is how God sees us—as a gift to the world, as people with value and purpose and beauty. Not because of our gifts or our jobs or our bank accounts, but because of who we are. He made us with deep value.

Let that understanding guide you as you read this story. Because the Exodus is really everyone's story. Every single one of us struggles with the oppression of being devalued. Every single one of us faces choices like the one those midwives made on a completely normal day in Egypt many thousands of years ago. I'm praying that we would learn from their example and let the boys live on our watch, that life would have room to cry, grow, learn, expand in us and through us. May we be born again into the beauty of God's Kingdom of life. Right now. Our Exodus starts as we encounter the breathtaking beauty of life.

Your life.

All life.

Is a *gift*.

Finding Freedom

What are some of the things—the expressions of goodness and beauty and life—that take your breath away?

How are these expressions sometimes devalued by others?

What can you do to assert and celebrate their value?