



God Hears Her Podcast

Episode 186 – Combatting Human Trafficking with Jenny Barber

Elisa Morgan, Eryn Eddy-Adkins with Jenny Barber

[Music]

Jenny Barber: We wanted to create a product that survivors could come into and be really excited and proud of. I absolutely love the fact that if you were to talk to any of our survivor staff, they do not feel like a special project. I never wanted to feel like somebody's special project. Right? And they all feel like they're a part of a movement, and they're a part of doing something that is bringing change and hope to others.

[Theme music]

Vivian Mabuni: You are listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you. Join our community of encouraging one another and learning to lean on God through Scripture, story, and conversation at GodhearsHer.org. God hears her. Seek and she will find.

Elisa: Before we dive into this conversation, we wanted to let you know that we'll be talking about different types of human trafficking. Please be mindful that this episode is for adult ears only. Now for the conversation.

Eryn: Elisa, you know, whenever you meet like another author-speaker, you're like, *oh, we're like kindred spirits. We know the ups and downs, and we don't...* but yet you don't know the person's story.

Elisa: Yeah.

Eryn: I feel that way about small business owners and...

Elisa: [Laughing]... Of course you do.

Eryn: ... just knowing like the journey and like witnessing it with my parents. And so whenever like I see a small business owner, and then I see them just take an idea and a concept and create a product, and then create impact behind that product, and then it grows. Oh my gosh, I have so much respect for it because I know it didn't come easy; but online it probably looks super easy and beautiful, especially if the



branding's amazing. I am so excited to talk with Jenny today. Jenny, welcome to *God Hears Her*. I can't wait to learn more about your journey, how you got to where you are. I've... I am literally not telling anybody right now what you do. I've just teed it up. [Laughter]... I would love for you to introduce yourself to our listeners.

Jenny: Hi. Yeah, thanks for having me. I'm Jenny Barber. I am the co-founder of Talitha Coffee. We are a coffee company that works with survivors of human trafficking.

Elisa: That is a profound name, Talitha Coffee. So maybe, just as we get started, tell us the story behind your naming it that.

Jenny: Yeah, so my husband and I have been working in anti-trafficking for about 15 years, and we have seen some of the darkest situations and places all over the world, and the phrase came from Mark 5, where Jesus raises Jairus' daughter from death to life. And he says, *Talitha kum*. And it means, "Maiden, arise." And so, as we began to build this coffee company, that was the inspiration behind the name, because we want to see people coming from the darkest places and situations rise from a place of desperation and hopelessness into abundance in life.

Elisa: Beautiful. So you said you've been doing this with your husband, Robert. How did this vision get born in you two?

Jenny: So I actually was exposed to the issue of trafficking from a really young age, and I'm a CSEC survivor myself. That means "commercial sexual exploitation of children." I experienced exploitation from the very, very early years of my life and then throughout my adolescence. And so, it came in many different forms, but it was always this hook in my life and really led me to very desperate places.

Elisa: I bet.

Jenny: ... and had a huge impact on my identity for a long time. My husband and I met when we were 13 and both had this moment in our lives around 18 where we really cried out to God and kind of hit rock bottom in a sense in both of our lives. And at the same time, even though at that point we weren't together, we were both discovering ourselves and who God was and all of that. And so at 19 we ended up, you know, we had connected again, and we ended up getting married. And I told him... I was like, "Listen, this is what I'm doing with my life. Like I am on a mission. I've found freedom in my own life, and I want to see freedom for others as well." And so he was all about it, and he saw trafficking for the first time in Thailand. And he saw a young Thai girl sitting on the lap of an American married man, and he realized



that this was an issue that, of course, affects the victims. But it was also something that was breaking down families and having a huge impact and attack on families. And we were just starting our own family at that time. And so, for us, that was really like the defining moment where we decided there's no turning back. We're going all in, and this is what we're doing.

Elisa: Mmm.

Eryn: Gosh, that's so beautiful.

Elisa: You know, I just wanna pause there. Thank you for reporting it so matter of factly, but I know that your heart is... I hear you in freedom, but our hearts just continue to heal. So I just wanna pause and say how sorry I am for what you've endured. And how brave you are for pushing through. You know, Eryn, as you opened us, you talked about how small business owners really have an identity portion in their mission and in what they do. And, Jenny, I hear that so beautifully in you. Your identity in mission, how do you negotiate that?

Jenny: Yeah. I am so thankful in my life because it has been such a journey for me. And like I mentioned, it definitely affected my identity so deeply. My exploitation began very, very early in life. For me, it was all around me, you know, I was witnessing things, and it wasn't just my own exploitation. I was seeing others being exploited as well. And as I got older, there was this lie that took root in me that this was my destiny. That God has favorites, and I was not one of them. And that this was kind of just the hand that I had been dealt, and I just needed to deal and get through it and survive. But I had a lot of people in my life. It's interesting, you know, they say 55 percent of children that are being exploited are going to school while they're being exploited. And that was definitely my reality. I was going to church. I was going to school, and I had this other part of my life that was happening, and nobody knew. And it was so sneaky and subtle the way that it took root in my life. There was the ability for that to continue to happen and that pattern to repeat because of the lies that were really hooked in me from a very, very young age. We're talking formative years here. I was really fortunate because I was going to church, and I kept showing up because there was something really deep inside me. Before I had ever heard anybody talk about God, I had an awareness that there was a God, because in those moments that were absolutely desperate and hopeless, I would feel the presence of God, and I would know that I was not alone. And so, there was this hunger that was inside of me that I kept pursuing, and I think through my faith, even though I was in such a desperate situation, I think that realizing that there was hope and there was somebody who gave hope, really got me through. And as I ...

Elisa: Wow!



Jenny: ... as I got older, I had moments of really crying out and being like, *where were You?* You know, *where were You when this was happening?* And God was so faithful to show me exactly where He was through that journey. And so, I think that as I've experienced that, it's brought so much healing to me. Right? And I've had people speaking identity over me and saying, *no, this is who you are.* And our circumstances do not define us. Right? And I'm not a victim, you know, I am an overcomer. And it is one of my greatest joys in life to see others walk into that reality, as well, and to experience that same level of freedom. And actually, when I tell my story, oftentimes, it almost feels like I'm telling somebody else's story because of the amount of freedom that's happened in my life.

Eryn: Wow!. So, Jenny, tell me — coffee. I know coffee is more than coffee. Tell me where did that passion begin? Why did you decide this is gonna be the... the outlet, the thing that we use?

Elisa: Yeah, because you could have done a lot of things to address the mission.

Eryn: Right, you could have made T-shirts, necklaces...

Jenny: Right.

Eryn: ... you know?

Jenny: So, right after that Thailand trip, I mean, we landed back in the States, and 19 days later we moved our family down to Los Angeles. Arriving in Los Angeles, we became very focused and intentional and just started to take advantage of every learning opportunity we could find. If it was law enforcement, social services, the local university, a church, whoever was talking about trafficking, we tried to be in the room for that and just really get a big perspective of what was happening — not just internationally, but we knew it was happening at home too, because of my story.

Elisa: Yeah. Mm-hmm.

Jenny: So in that, we began to work and collaborate with other organizations that were doing work and kind of identified: where are the gaps? Where is work not happening?

Elisa: Smart. Yeah.

Jenny: ...Because we didn't want to just replicate what was already going on. Right?



Elisa: So smart.

Jenny: ... So we would partner with people who were going into strip clubs and working with those exploited through pornography and all of that. And then we found the areas of Los Angeles where nobody was going into. Maybe it was too scary, uh, like Compton or, you know, maybe it was overlooked because there would only be one or two victims on the street that night. And so those were the places that we would go into. And we started to learn that statistic of the average age of entry into exploitation is 11 to 15 years old, and we were seeing that firsthand. I think that that became something that really struck us at first, because we're like with this, that means there's lack of opportunities for them, and there's going to be issues here. So my husband actually started roasting coffee as a hobby. And he started with a popcorn popper, like one of those whirly pops on our stove top.

Eryn: Yes, I love that.

Jenny: And he started making coffee that way, and we were so surprised. We're like, "wait a second. This is actually really incredible!" And so he just became really intentional with it. He would pray every time he made a batch of coffee and just...

Elisa: Oh wow!

Jenny: ... Just asking God to bless every effort, you know, and bless that roast and the people who would have that coffee and all of that. And so he just became really intentional with it and began selling bags of coffee to help fund the work that we were doing. You know, it was like, "buy a bag of coffee, get a bag on the outreaches, on the streets," and that kind of thing. And so, as he was doing that and just getting really incredible, graduating to bigger roasters, I was getting really frustrated because we were going out on the streets and sending teams of people on the streets and sending... I mean, we were a part of incredible work helping other organizations get started overseas, and we were seeing the same exact thing happen repetitively, and that was we would see victims leave exploitation. They would go through recovery, and then within a matter of months they were coming right back to us. And we were seeing deeper levels of trauma, disassociation, all of these things. But we were also seeing that they were sending a very clear message: Don't even try to leave this life because there isn't hope for another one. That was bothering me, right? Because I'm like how... we're giving so much and like putting in all of our effort to a broken system.

Eryn: Yeah.



Jenny: That was the point where my husband said, “well, let’s do something about it then. Let’s be the answer to this issue that we’re seeing, and let’s start a coffee company.” And so we began to pursue that. We actually opened up our very first shop in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles at the beginning of 2020. So it was a wild time.

Elisa: Perfect! Wow! Yeah.

Jenny: Everybody is like, “this is... are you guys sure?” But yeah, so we ended up getting going, and it just really... even on so many fronts. Like the shop brought such a light and such an encouragement to that part of the city at such a dark and hopeless time. And we began spreading awareness about trafficking and all of that. So, as we were doing that, we realized we could hire maybe one or two survivors, but we would be limited in that space.

Eryn: Mm.

Jenny: So we began to focus on the roasting side and the potential of expanding the roasting side. And we were really passionate about “Why coffee? Because coffee is something that can make a difference, from the very farms all the way through to the baristas. Right? And we were beginning to see that. So a lot of exploitation happens on coffee farms, and a lot of times, you know, when I see people purchasing really cheap coffee, I’m like, “you need to know like that’s maybe cheap for you, but it’s a high cost to somebody else.” And so we knew that we could combat that exploitation from the farms all the way through to the baristas serving the coffee.

Eryn: Mm.

Jenny: At the end of 2022, we made our very first acquisition of another roastery down in San Diego, which is one of the beverage capitals of the world. And so we went from 300 pounds a month to about 10,000 pounds a month overnight.

Eryn: Well, and I love that you’ve incorporated not only what you’ve experienced but what you’ve seen in the survivors. There was something that you had on your website that I loved, and I wrote it down: “Hope is believing in the power of fresh starts and second chances.”

Jenny: Yeah. That’s exactly, you know, one of our coffee blends is called Arise. And that’s, you know, because we want to see hope arise. That’s what we want to see in everything that we do. We want to do it with excellence. Right? I think there’s a million things that we could have done, but we wanted to create



a product that survivors could come into and be really excited and proud of. I absolutely love the fact that if you were to talk to any of our survivor staff, they do not feel like a special project. I never wanted to feel like somebody's special project. Right? And they all feel like they're a part of a movement, and they're a part of doing something that is bringing change and hope to others. Through our growth, we've been able to really focus on three main things, and that is: 1) providing employment opportunities. So every position is opened up to a survivor first in our network, so they kind of get first dibs. And then we also have really high-level trained staff in the coffee industry. And so we have a coffee training institute, and that's based in San Diego right now but will expand with us as we grow.

Eryn: That's awesome.

Jenny: And then we have the Talitha Survivor Care Network that we've also been creating, which is pulling the experts to the table, those who are doing the work. We actually believe that we can see the end of trafficking. We actually believe that we can see this issue resolved, but that it is going to take everybody working together. Right? If Talitha sets out to end trafficking on our own, we... we're not going to be able to do it. It's too big of an issue. But if we pull together with the other experts in the other agencies that are doing incredible work, and we all work together to really fight this issue and support survivors, we believe that we can see the end of this issue.

Eryn: Yeah.

Jenny: So, our Talitha Survivor Care Network offers everything from support groups and workforce readiness, life skills training, reunification with children, legal services, all of that kind of stuff, just to make sure that every area of need is really being addressed. And that we're not just providing a job, but that we're providing resources to equip for successful reentry.

Eryn: Yeah, that's awesome.

Elisa: You know, in terms of ending human trafficking, and all the people who are listening today, can you speak to two things? What happens if you are a victim and you need help? And then, secondly, what can we all do to make a dent in solving this issue?

Jenny: Yeah, I think if there are people who are actively being exploited, I think just knowing that there is hope and reaching out. I think a lot of times there is a very clear message being sent by traffickers and pimps and all of that. That is a very clear message of *I am the only person that's here for you. I'm the only person that cares. I'm the only person that's safe. I have to protect you from law enforcement. I have to*



protect you from other pimps. I have to protect you from yourself 'cause you're not even capable. And your only value and contribution to this earth is your body and what you can offer through your body. And so, the message that I would send to that is that it's not true. It's just an absolute lie. There are so many people who care. There are so many people who are working so tirelessly and diligently to provide opportunities to reach out and to help. And that's why like having that wraparound care model is so important, just to show like we're here and we're showing up. There are resources. There are obviously like the human trafficking hotlines and things like that. But I would just say to know that there is value on your life and that you are worth asking for help. Right? I'm only where I am today because there were people that were willing to find me in my most desperate of situations and reach out and tell me that I had value on my life. I think, with the what-can-we-do side of things, education is really important. We have come so far in awareness and information surrounding the issues of trafficking. And so, I think that it's important for people to learn and to look for opportunities to learn and to not be naive. I mean, even like... as I mentioned, being intentional with where you put your money. Are the places I'm putting my money places that are bringing exploitation? Or are they bringing hope?

Elisa: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Jenny: There's so many opportunities. You... you name a category of spending, and there is likely an area where there is an opportunity to bring hope. And then just bringing awareness wherever you go, you know, not settling for what seems like hopeless realities. I know that when I was in high school, I would hear kids talking about going to strip clubs when they were 21 as if it was like a rite of passage and things like that. And I feel like there's so many areas of our culture where people have kind of settled and just decided like pornography is just a part of life, and it's something that people are going to do. But if you look at the amount of people, 89% of those that are in the sex industry, we're talking legal sex industry, say that they feel trapped and that they feel like there is no other option for them. When you look at the issue of prostitution, a lot of times people like to talk about how it's empowering and how sex work is, you know, empowering and all of this stuff. Three percent of those who are in prostitution are actually there because they have chosen to be and because they want to be. And I think that even if you have chosen your life and to live in that way, there are such deep impacts on identity and psychological wellbeing. Survivors of exploitation experience PTSD on the same level of those who have been in hand-to-hand combat.

Elisa: Believe it. Yeah, I believe it.

Jenny: On the front lines, fighting wars, seeing the most atrocious things. All of those things, and the war is on their body. Right? The war is on their psyche and all of these things, and so I think never settling.



Don't turn a blind eye. I think it's always safer to ask a question. Right? I had people in my life that were asking questions: "Who is that person you're hanging out with? And why are you allowing those pictures to be posted of yourself?" And things like that. I had people that were asking questions, and because of that, it helped me realize that people cared.

Elisa: Good. Yeah. Just pointing it out. You know, you mentioned the human trafficking hotline. I just want say it because some people won't have chance to go to show notes. It's 888-373-7888; 888-373-7888.

Eryn: Jenny, how have you been able to see God as good, when you've seen so much bad?

Jenny: Yeah. That has been a journey for me. That did not come overnight.

Elisa: Yeah.

Jenny: The Scripture says, "it's harder for a rich man to get into heaven." I think what it's referencing there is that when you have everything — right — when you don't have lack in your life, it's hard to acknowledge and recognize the need of a Savior.

Eryn: Hmm.

Jenny: Because I came from such brokenness, I knew that I needed help. I knew that I needed a lifeline and that I needed something that was greater than myself. And as I look back on my life, even in the darkest of situations, I see God's hand on my life. I fell into addiction during some of my exploitation later in my high school years because there was so much brokenness that I was facing and trauma that I had dealt with and things that I was really trying to run away from, memories that I was trying to escape and things like that. And so even in that, there were so many times that, you know, I would overdose and things like that. And you would see God's hand and protection on my life. Somebody coming from out of nowhere to give me the help that I needed, and things like that. And even just in situations, I think, like I said, there was this deep awareness in me that there was Somebody way greater than I was. So I actually, to this day, have very core memories of being in horrific scenarios and feeling the presence of God in those dark places and knowing that I wasn't alone.

Eryn: Hmm.



Jenny: If you look through my life, I think it's just a reflection of the Scriptures, too, where there is this relentless pursuit throughout this whole journey of God pursuing His people. Right? It was the same thing on my life, that God was relentlessly pursuing me and reaching out to me. And I think that I just look back on that evidence and I just see that. And I think just even seeing the outcome and the deliverance in my own life, my story is not a story of brokenness. It really isn't. My story is such a story of redemption.

Eryn: Mmm.

Elisa: So how did you get out?

Jenny: Yeah. When I talk about my story, you'll hear... I talk about exploitation. I did not have this story of trafficking — right — where it was... You know, I think a lot of times when people hear of trafficking, they think of the movie “Taken,” you know?

Elisa: Yes.

Jenny: ...They think of these moments where somebody is kind of like grabbed and snatched and thrown into a trunk and things like that. There are three different types of exploitation that we see. You have people who do have those situations. Right? We call that “guerilla pimping” and so... “guerilla trafficking,” so that's very aggressive kidnapping, moving over state lines, moving across borders, things like that. It can even just happen in a community. You can see somebody being exploited through aggression and violence in that way. Then we have what we refer to as like a “Romeo Pimp.” The Romeos are sneaky. They are the ones who are looking for those who are looking for relationships, connection, parental figures, things like that. And they're exploiting that need, and they're luring in through relationship. Then, of course, there's like what we refer to as like the CEO that's getting somebody into a fraudulent business transaction in order to exploit them. A lot of my exploitation, I would say, because of the brokenness that I was born into at a really young age, kind of just happened, and then I was adopted when I was six. But that continued to be a pattern in my life because of those Romeos that were looking for insecurity. They were looking for isolation and brokenness and things like that. And I had a point in my early years where I really, because of my brokenness, disconnected from my adoptive parents and began to press into the wrong places. And so that is where exploitation really got a bigger hook of people looking to exploit those vulnerabilities and pull into addiction and then exploit for profit and things like that. And so, as I began to remove... as I began to cry out for help, I would say that that moment where I said I hit rock bottom, that was the moment for me. I actually found myself alone in a cabin in the woods because of a situation that I had been able to flee, crying out to God. I was coming off of drugs, and I was very alone and isolated.



And I said, *If You get me through this night, I will serve You with the rest of my life.* I was absolutely terrified, but I knew that the only option was to run back to unsafety.

Elisa: Mm-hmm.

Jenny: And so in that moment I fell asleep. And then I woke up the next morning, and I called my mom. And I said, "I need you to come find me. I have no idea where I am, except I'm in the woods in a cabin alone." And she did. She came and found me, and that really was the moment where things shifted in my life. I found myself in a place where I could reach out to... for help and cry out for help. And she showed up, and she picked me up and she said, "no questions asked. I'm glad you're home."

Elisa: You took a risk. Yeah. Yeah. And there was help available

Jenny: And we have so many stories, you know. We have survivor staff that will share about like just having... Everybody has that moment of great courage when they leave, you know, whether they're on the streets or in the clubs or wherever they're at, wherever their exploitation is taking place. People who leave, it really comes to a moment of great courage. They say that it takes an average of seven attempts for a victim to leave the life and to pursue freedom and, you know, actually reintegrate. I think the reason for that is because there are not opportunities. And so that's what we're working to do, is create opportunities and to bring people into that journey and to create something that people can be a part of. Right? So by buying coffee, you can actually be a part of the movement. I've seen a lot of really dark and hopeless things, but I have also seen beauty. And I have seen God's goodness all over the world. And it's funny because in those places that seem really dark and hopeless, those are always the people that are the most joyful and the most content and the most thankful. I have, you know, my husband and I, some of our most beautiful memories are being in Swaziland and sitting around a fire at night with a group of orphans who had absolutely nothing and were eating like basically grits every single day. And that was all they ever had, and it was like only because we were there that they had as much as they did, and things like that. And they would sing... every single night they would sing "You are faithful, oh God, You are faithful. Every day, every night You are faithful, oh God!" And just seeing like really desperate situations, those are the people that are the most thankful and have the most joy. And I've just seen that in my own life too.

[Theme Music]



Eryn: I started off this conversation so excited to hear about a small business with big impact, and I'm so glad that I got to learn more. The work that Jenny is doing is so inspiring, and how amazing that we can be a part of it!

Elisa: I agree, Eryn. You know, if you enjoy this episode, please be sure to leave us a comment or review wherever you listen to your podcasts. We'd love to hear from you.

Eryn: Before we go, be sure to check out our show notes for a link to the Talitha Coffee Roasters website. You can find that and more at Godhearsher.org. That's Godhearsher-dot-o.r.g.

Elisa: Thanks for joining us, and don't forget: God hears you. He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

Eryn: Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Jade Gustman and Mary Jo Clark. We want to also thank all of the people that are working against human trafficking. You are doing amazing work that makes a difference. Thanks everyone.

Elisa: Our Daily Bread Ministries is a donor supported nonprofit ministry dedicated to making the life changing wisdom and stories of the Bible come alive for all people around the world.

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