

IS SUFFERING REALLY ONE OF GOD'S PURPOSES IN MARRIAGE?

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of FlyingFreeNow.com, and you're listening to the Flying Free Podcast, a support resource for women of faith looking for hope and healing from hidden emotional and spiritual abuse.

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 4. Today, Rachel and I are going to be talking about, well, the suffering wife idea and whether or not... the question we're going to really be discussing is is marriage designed by God to be a crucible of suffering for women? We've heard the idea that God's purpose for us is not to make us happy but to make us holy, so then people will say, "In marriage, same thing. You're not supposed to necessarily be happy in your marriage, but if you've got an abusive marriage, then that's a great opportunity to just grow in your holiness." Is that really what the purpose of marriage is? Is that God's ultimate purpose for us as human beings, to suffer in order to become holy? And what is the role of suffering in our lives? There is so much to cover here, and we're just going to sit down. Rachel and I are just sitting here, and we're just going to have a chat about it and hopefully we can all learn a few things about this subject.

RACHEL: Hey, Natalie.

NATALIE: Hi, Rachel. Are you ready to dive in?

RACHEL: Yeah, there's so much to cover here. This picture of the pious, virtuous "suffering for Jesus" wife. Wow, I can't wait to get into this with you.

NATALIE: How did this subject affect your life?

RACHEL: Well, what is the ultimate picture of a Christian woman that is in mainstream Christian culture? You know, we think about Proverbs 31 and staying at home and raising children and being a good wife, right? So that's at all costs, right? We have to persevere in those goals no matter what, no matter what our external circumstances are, no matter how godly or ungodly our husbands may truly be at home. It is up to us to keep it all together in the mainstream Christian idea, correct? If you do end up sacrificing yourself, maybe more than you ever thought possible, then that's somehow really virtuous, and you're held up and heralded as the ultimate pinnacle of a Christian example, right?

NATALIE: Right.

RACHEL: I have definitely had to turn this on my head, because honestly, growing up that's what I wanted. I wanted to have a family that was... my family was kind of unstable growing up, and I wanted to have this stable, Christian, church going picture of a family. I sort of did, but goodness gracious, it was not true. It was a façade. It was nothing like what I had imagined or dreamed of, and so I think at the crux of this, though, if you really break it down, what a works-based idea that somehow you've got to earn your standing as a woman of virtue by suffering under the harsh hand of your husband or the harsh words of your husband. And Jesus is the one who suffered for us. There is no calling for us to continue to suffer to earn our salvation or earn our grace before God. It's just not there, and it is confusing, because I think there are some verses that we can talk about that do talk about suffering, and we know that suffering is going to come in this world, but it comes regardless of whether or not we bring it on ourselves, and if we bring it on ourselves, it somehow doesn't make us more holy. That's not the way it works. It's going to happen. Suffering is going to happen, and it can make us more holy, but I do not believe we are called to bring it on ourselves and to somehow stay in a suffering situation where we may be suffering for lies, suffering to keep up that façade, suffering to enable our husband to treat us selfishly and to use us and to abuse us. That is not the suffering God calls us to, to suffer for lies. Jesus did not suffer for lies. He suffered because of lies. He suffered because people were telling false things about him and calling him, saying that he was filled with demons, etc. And he stood up for truth, and he suffered for it, so we're called to follow that example. And I think we will absolutely suffer if we stand up for truth. The suffering is going to come if we stand up and call what is actually going on behind closed doors for what it is. We are going to suffer. People are going to say the wrong things about us. They may say we're filled with demons just like they did Jesus-

NATALIE: Or that you have borderline personality disorder.

RACHEL: Oh sure. Yeah, or yeah. Like you're crazy and you're so sensitive and how dare you not just lean into that calling of not being happy but being holy, right? Because that's what it's all about. So they're not going to understand. People are not going to understand you. They're not going to herald you as the ultimate picture of a pious, virtuous wife. You will be in a place of suffering. I can guarantee you, but it is standing for truth, and you will know at the core of your being that you are standing for God's truth.

NATALIE: Right. I think people... well, the verse that comes to my mind is 1 Peter 4:19, that I think people use this verse as their proof text for why women should suffer in their marriages. "But let those who suffer according to God's will and trust their souls to a faithful creator while doing good." They'll say, "Woman, you need to suffer according

to God's will," but their definition of what God's will is is not always what God's will actually is. And who's to say what that is? So I think you have to go back to defining what doing good is, you know, suffering while doing good, suffering while doing God's will, what is doing good, and what is God's will? See, the Pharisees had a completely different definition of what God's will was and what doing good was than Jesus did, and the Pharisees' definition was you do good by not healing on the Sabbath. You keep the Sabbath at all costs, and Jesus said, "No, if the law says to keep the Sabbath but the law is actually causing harm to a human being, the human being trumps the law, okay?"

RACHEL: Because the Sabbath was just made for man, not man made for the Sabbath, just like marriage is made for man, not man for marriage.

NATALIE: Exactly, so if you apply these principles, really all you need to do ... a couple of years ago I read through the book of John numerous times, I just would read through it and then start over and read through it again. I really wanted to get to know Jesus. I had been looking my whole life towards people who had a religious education or who were pastors or small group leaders or elders or people in "authority" over me and thought they were the voice of God in my life.

RACHEL: Yeah, me too.

NATALIE: I really just decided I want to find out who Jesus is, and I want Jesus to be the voice of God in my life. I need to get to know him again, and what I discovered is that He was so unlike religious leaders. He actually... like you said, He turned everything on its head, and I realized Satan, he doesn't come with this evil agenda that looks evil and is easily recognizable. He comes as an angel of light, and his agenda is very difficult to recognize. It looks good. It looks holy, it looks righteous. It looks biblical, and he uses the Bible. It's actually designed to undermine the love of Jesus Christ in our lives. It's designed to undermine the gospel. It's designed really to strip away and steal the gospel from human beings. Things that Jesus came to die for, it's designed to tell a lie about that and to strip it away from people and women in particular. When you strip that away from women, you're stripping it away from men too. I mean, women are not the only people that suffer. Men suffer as well, so yeah. It's huge. It's a systemic, huge issue.

RACHEL: It is, and I think it also strives to bring us back into the bondage of the law, because we can never keep the law, right? That's the whole purpose of why Jesus came. What do we know now about what God's purpose has been all along? He talks about it in the Old Testament, about writing His law of love on our hearts, so we can walk in the spirit. We have the Holy Spirit when we become saved, and the Holy Spirit is to guide

us, to point us to Christ, to draw us near to God, so if we fall back into the bondage of the law, I mean, it's like Paul's making these arguments all through Galatians and Romans about what is the point of Jesus coming if we want to live in the law? You know, because the Jews were struggling with this. The early Christians were struggling with this, because they'd lived with the law as their guide their entire life, so I can imagine it's scary to think "Oh my gosh, I've got this freedom," and aren't we still dealing with this same idea today, that we have this freedom in Christ and we have the Spirit in us, and His love is written on our hearts, and we can trust that and walk in it every day instead of going back to the old bondage of rules and of finger pointing down at you that you better shape yourself up? Otherwise, you're not going to be able to stand before God. You know, that's the idea that's communicated to us. So, what a decision we have to make every single day that we're going to walk with the Spirit and not walk in that bondage of the law and feel like we have to somehow earn our way into God's good standing.

NATALIE: Right, and there has to be a willingness on our part, humility on our part, to recognize that as humans who are still in our earthly bodies and have a propensity to sin, that we are not going to be able to walk perfectly every day.

RACHEL: No, not in this life.

NATALIE: Numerous times a day we will have bad thoughts, we'll have negative responses to people, but that is what Jesus died for. When we try to pretend that that's not the case, and when we try to act perfect and be perfect and put on this façade so that other people on the outside will think that we've got it all together, we're actually not walking in humility or in love, and we can't love others either. Really, it's a way of showing dishonor to Christ, and it's prideful. It's absolutely saying, "I can get my act together on my own." But we pay lip service... "The Holy Spirit is helping me to be so perfect." No, the Holy Spirit doesn't help us to be perfect. The Holy Spirit is there to encourage and to convict, but if we were perfect why would he have to ever convict us, right?

RACHEL: Yeah, that's true.

NATALIE: He convicted us of our sin because we're not perfect, because we're living in our earthly body. We acknowledge our sin, and we embrace God's forgiveness for it, and we move on. The problem when you're living in an abusive situation is that you have someone in your life. Well, especially when we're talking about women of faith who are probably married to men who say that they're Christians. They're probably going to church together and putting on this show that everything is great and things

really are not great, but you're living with someone who is expecting perfection of you and you can't be perfect. They're expecting perfection of you, but they're also expecting you to be this perfect Barbie doll person that-

RACHEL: With no needs.

NATALIE: Right, that doesn't have any needs. You dress the way they want you to dress. You act the way they want you to act. You always defer to them. You have no opinions of your own. You have no ideas of your own unless they're exactly what his opinions and his ideas are. If they're anything separate, if you're a separate person, then you're being rebellious, and they'll use spiritual terms like that. You're being rebellious, you're being disobedient. You're being arrogant and prideful if you have your own opinion. Basically stripping away your humanity, and all in the name of this is spiritual, and you become less and Christ becomes more, but really what it really is is you become less and this spouse and all of his flying monkeys become more as far as in control over you. It really has nothing to do with God whatsoever.

RACHEL: Well, I wanted to expand on that, because I've realized over the past, you know, 18 months how much of a role my ex-husband plays as God in my life. My marriage wasn't making me more holy. It was making me more into the ottoman, this character that my husband wanted me to be, which wasn't holy. I was joining in on all sorts of things that he pressured me into doing that were not holy. You know, even something as simple as talking bad about other people, you know, being scornful and mocking other people, which really isn't where my heart was, but that was the environment I was in. And so taking him off that throne of my life, which I would have never acknowledged that he was in, but he was practically. Taking him off that throne and putting God on the throne and really finding out the character of God and who he is and what he says about me was huge. I mean, it's like oh my gosh. Actually divorce made me more holy. Wow. Well, and you have to define things. You know, you have to define what is holy and define what is the purpose of marriage? Holiness is not doing what everyone around you tells you to do. That's not holiness.

NATALIE: That's so true.

RACHEL: But that was what I thought it was, and in effect that's what it was. That fear that you've got to do everything that everyone else around you needs you to do. Otherwise, if they're upset with you, you're out of line with God.

NATALIE: Right. Okay, so let's talk about what the purpose of marriage is, because there is a thing out there that says the purpose of marriage is to make you holy. It's not to

make you happy, but did God establish marriage? In the garden of Eden did God establish marriage for the purpose of making Adam and Eve holy?

RACHEL: I don't remember reading that in Genesis. Did you see something about that?

NATALIE: Well, when God put Adam and Eve together and established marriage, they were already holy. They were perfect.

RACHEL: They were.

NATALIE: They had never even sinned.

RACHEL: They're perfect.

NATALIE: The whole purpose was completely... it was all about-

RACHEL: Being one flesh.

NATALIE: Exactly. It was all about being together. It was fellowship. It was unity. It was enjoyment of one another, reveling in this wonderful relationship with one another, and with their creator. It was this beautiful, happy... could we use the word happy? Is it okay to use the word happy? Do you think they were happy?

RACHEL: I don't know.

NATALIE: Is happiness a sin?

RACHEL: It's almost like "How dare you go there," you know? Like you're supposed to be holy. How dare you even think about the prospect of-

NATALIE: Of being happy. Like happiness is not allowed. I just think that yeah, so when sin came into the world and they sinned, their fellowship was broken, you know? They looked at each other. They were ashamed. That's when the finger pointing began. That's when the judgment began. That's when the murder began and everything else that was horrible. That's when the men ruling over women, which was not a curse, it was a judgment, and it wasn't God's prescription for mankind from then on out. That was just a description of what happened because of the fall. The whole idea of Christianity and the New Testament and what Jesus Christ came to do was to actually turn back, reverse that so that Christians who have the Holy Spirit living inside of them could begin to work towards going back to the way it was before sin came into the world when men and

women were unified, when they were ruling the world together. That's what... side by side. And that's what our job as Christians... we're supposed to be striving for that, and the purpose of marriage is for that fellowship, but it's also a reflection of Christ in the church, and when you've got an abusive individual, whether it's the male or the female, because it can go the other way as well, you don't have a picture of that beautiful unity between Christ and the church.

Really I can honestly say this. Every single woman that I've talked to who's been in an emotionally abusive relationship, one of the biggest things that they deal with on a regular basis is accusation. They're accused. If they ever try to say, "Hey, you know what, this is really, really hurting me and I have to have some boundaries here," they are accused of all kinds of... just everything gets turned on them. They are blamed for everything. They are accused of being a bad Christian. They're accused of being a bad wife. They're accused of just fill in the blank. They're accused of that. That's a picture of what Satan does to the church. Satan is the accuser, and another common thing in abusive relationships is deception. There's a lot of deception, and that is the other thing about the enemy. He's the father of lies. He is the great deceiver, so it is no wonder that when you have an abusive situation, whether it's a marriage or a domestic abuse of children or an abusive situation in the workplace, wherever you have abuse, you're going to have accusation and deception. Those are just the fingerprints of the enemy. Is that really... when you hear Christian leaders say, people like John Piper say, "Yeah, the purpose of marriage is to make you holy, and if a woman has to suffer under an abusive situation, well that's just her grand opportunity to be holy." Really? Are we as a church, when you look at the church and you realize that one quarter to one third of women are living in an abusive, domestically abusive, situation at home, is that really what we want to be promoting in our churches and supporting and lifting up?

RACHEL: Is that the picture that Christ presented of his fellowship and relationship with his church? It's not. It's not. That is not ever what is presented to us in the bible, and this idea of fellowship, you know, this one flesh union, every single time, you know, your husband doesn't look you in the eye and he's basically ignoring your humanity, you know, when you're trying to connect with him, and that was something that was really big in my marriage, or he implies that you're a nag because you've presented something to him that you need from him and you're wanting to come alongside to him to work out this solution, he acts like you're just so sensitive and you can't take a joke or something like that. That is breaking down that one flesh union bit by tiny bit. And it's so destructive and painful, and it's like the frog in the pot of boiling water. You don't realize what's going on until one day you do, but by then what is there left? There's certainly not trust. How can you be one flesh with something you don't even trust? You can't even be at rest with? You can't even be completely at peace with? That is not one

flesh. That is not God's idea. I think probably many women listening to this would agree that their husbands are probably very open to being one flesh with them in a sexual way, but what is that complemented with in an emotional way or spiritual way or mental way? You know? Is it really one flesh if it's only physical? No. I don't think so.

NATALIE: No. Well, and that's just really taking advantage of another human being, you know? When you're treating them like they're not a separate human being from you but you are taking advantage of their body and using their body for your own pleasure but you're not really investing in a relationship with the whole person, acknowledging them as a separate person, acknowledging and respecting and honoring their personhood and their different views and their different perspectives and there's no empathy, it's not a oneness of flesh either. It's just another way that they take from their spouse. You know, I think about the holocaust and Corey Tanbum and how she went against the government and hid people. When you're hiding something, that's deception, right? And yet, the bible says do not lie. So, it's an example of how you can take the letter of the law, but if you applied it across the board, you would be actually aiding and abetting-

RACHEL: Evil.

NATALIE: ...great evil, exactly. So she didn't do that though. She and her family, they hid some Jewish people and then, of course, they were discovered. The Jewish people got away, thank goodness, but her and her sister and her dad and her sister and father died in the camps and then she actually was in the camp for a long time, but she eventually, due to a glitch in the system, she actually ended up having an opportunity to leave the camp, and they called her name, and she got to leave. She did not say, "Oh, but you know what, I have a chance to stay in this camp and be holy. I'm holier if I am suffering."

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: She didn't do that. She took the opportunity to actually get out of that situation. It didn't make her more holy.

RACHEL: It was God's will for her to get out I'm guessing, you know? The Holy Spirit was behind that glitch.

NATALIE: Right, exactly.

RACHEL: Because what did she do after that? She went about the world the rest of her

life proclaiming God's grace and forgiveness and truth.

NATALIE: Yeah, and she also didn't go to those people and go, "You know what? I think you guys made a mistake. I don't think my name was supposed to be on there." No, she just took her opportunity and she left. Then, I think too about people like William Wilberforce, who I watched in that movie, "Amazing Grace," and I had no idea that he went through so much depression and just mental anguish in his fighting really to set slaves free and fighting for the rights of all people, and he was willing to go through that. In his speaking truth, he suffered in his personal life in huge ways, and I've often thought of him, because getting out... I know that you've experienced this as well, and most women that I've talked to who have gotten out have experienced great amounts of rejection by people and also slander. Lies have been told about them, people that they have loved that they thought would never turn their backs on them have turned their backs on them. I've experienced that. Almost every woman who has actually stood up and said, "I'm not going to do this anymore. I'm not going to lie anymore. I'm not going to pretend anymore, and I'm done." They have faced extraordinary emotional hardship, and yet in my book that's suffering for the truth. That's suffering for what's right, but people, the people around him, they condemned him. They did not view it that way, okay? The leaders did not view it that way. A lot of the people did not view it that way, so when you try to get out of your abusive situation you can expect that most people are not going to view you like a martyr. They're not going to view you like a suffering saint. They're going to view you the way they viewed Jesus, that you're possessed by demons or no, Satan has got a hold of your life now. You have strayed away from God. You no longer know God. You are not obedient to God. You are a rebel. You deserve to be excommunicated. They will spread lies about you. That's probably one of the most... wouldn't you say that was one of the most painful things?

RACHEL: Yeah. Oh gosh. Because well the approval of other people was how I got my worth and felt okay about myself, so God, I think, this past year and a half has been sort of removing that from me piece by piece, and it is so extraordinarily painful to make that transfer from where your foundation is resting on what other people think about you to your foundation is resting on the truth of God and knowing that God knows what's in your heart and that you are loved and accepted by him and he knows the truth. Proverbs 15:3 says, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere observing the wicked and the good." He sees all of it. He sees your heart. He sees your husband's heart. He sees the hearts of the people who are accusing you, and that is the ultimate validation where we got the validation from the people around us before, now we get our validation from the Lord knowing that he's searched our heart and he sees what's in it.

NATALIE: I love that. I think we're just going to end on that. Is there anything else you

wanted to say about this subject before we close for today?

RACHEL: There's one more thought, and I don't want to take up too much time, but the other thing about this idea is what is most loving for our husbands to do? To do for our husbands really? Some people would argue that it's just stay married to him at all costs, but I argue that actually if we love our husbands we do not want to enable them to sin and selfishness and to treat other people in a way that God has called us not to treat others but in fact they're treating people with injustice. I think that it's important for us to remember that being loving to our husbands does not always look like staying married to them, and sometimes the most loving thing you can do for someone is a wake up call. They may not wake up, but you've done what you can without enabling the selfishness any longer. And you know, I do love my ex-husband. I hope that he humbles himself before God and that he understands how his behavior affects other people. It hasn't happened yet to my knowledge, but maybe someday it will, but I'm no longer enabling it.

NATALIE: Well, and that is, I think, one of the most excruciating parts about the whole process of getting out too, is because a lot of women, they don't want to get divorced, and they do love their husbands very much. They have invested, you know, some of them two and three decades of their lives, so they don't want to just throw that away, and they love their husband. They want their husband to repent and to change, and they want to stay together as a family. To be the one that has to initiate a separation is horrifically painful. It doesn't look like that. The horrible thing is that you feel so alone, because you know that other people don't understand. They have no idea the pain of initiating a separation. It looks just like... the one who is being forced out appears to be the victim.

RACHEL: And that's what they love, right?

NATALIE: Right, exactly. They want everyone to believe that, because then they will be enabled and supported even more, but the one who's actually doing the initiating and doing the hard thing is not getting the support usually. She has very little support in that, and she looks like the aggressor. She looks like she's the one that was the bad one all along, because finally at the very end she's finally standing up for what's true. She's finally telling the truth about the situation, and people don't want to believe her.

RACHEL: Yeah. She's just being selfish.

NATALIE: That's really painful. Then, to file for divorce, to take it even a step further and to file for divorce, which is final and it's a death, it's a death on so many levels. It's a

death of a marriage. It's a death of a relationship. It's a death of a family. It's a death of a dream. It's a death of your financial health. There are so many layers of loss when you file for divorce and you don't want to do it. For me, I was just begging God, "Please do not." I felt like Jesus in the garden saying, "Please, let this pass for me. Please, let something come in at the last minute and rescue me from this. I do not want to do this," and I ended up going away for a weekend and just going over the last 20 years of my life and journals that I had written. By the time I was done, I was on my knees just weeping and saying, "Okay, God. I will do it. I will be obedient to you," and I knew that I was going to my death in many ways. And I was. I think the old Natalie died and I lost so much, but you know, it was shortly after that, once the divorce got into gear, I ended up meeting the man I married to today, and so God ended up giving me back something that was very powerful and beautiful and healing, which was not something I had ever dreamed. I just assumed that I was going to be alone the rest of my life and living in that kind of a state, but God was very gracious to me and I'm thankful for that. Anyhow, that's another thing, but my whole point in all of that was to say that it's really painful to be the one to initiate that, and I have talked to women who will say, "I don't want to be the one to initiate that. I'll be separated, but I'm not going to actually be the one to initiate a divorce," and the problem is that a lot of times abusive individuals don't want... especially the church, they don't want that final divorce thing to happen, because then what happens is they lose control. They can keep control over the situation if they can keep you married, and the marriage is what's important. It's the marriage is what's important, not the relationship, not love, not human beings, not a follower of Jesus Christ.

RACHEL: Not a true one flesh union that actually fulfills what that means. It's just sort of a fake one that you tie up in a bow.

NATALIE: Right. It's a lie. It's telling a lie about yourself, about your spouse, about your church, and about God. It's really hard. Did you experience that when you were in your relationship? Wasn't it hard to go to church and feel like my whole life is a lie? It's just a lie. There's so much... it's so uncomfortable.

RACHEL: I just didn't understand why everything was so horrific all the time, like why my husband wasn't loving to me like the other Christian husbands were. I made up in my mind that I didn't deserve it, so I acted around that all the time.

NATALIE: Yeah.

RACHEL: How can you approach God and have... I mean, if you're just bogged down in shame all the time and you don't even know which way is up and it's just so painful and

hurtful constantly, like I don't know that I ever really have stood in the love of God for me until after I left my marriage.

NATALIE: Wow.

RACHEL: It has really taken me from that.

NATALIE: Yeah. I would have to agree. I think a lot of women would say the same thing. Because we were looking for love in... that song. We were looking for love in all the wrong places.

RACHEL: Wrong places, yeah. Well, you know, silly as we were looking for it from our husbands, but you know, really, it was. It was the wrong place. He's not capable of that. You know, he's got so many other issues, not the least of which is pride that prevents him from truly, authentically loving and not just saying those words.

NATALIE: Right. You know, I think I would like to close by just praying for the people who are listening. Can we do that? Then we'll end.

RACHEL: Yeah.

NATALIE: Heavenly Father, I pray for the women who are listening to this podcast right now. You know exactly who they are. You see them. You see where they're sitting or where they're driving their car or where they're laying down. You see exactly what's going on in their homes. You know their hearts. You know their circumstances, and You love them. You see them and You love them and You believe them, and You know them inside and out. You know their hearts. I pray that You would continue to bring them light and education and truth, shed Your light in the dark corners of their life, and help them to understand the truth about their situation, but most importantly, I pray that they would understand the truth about Your deep love for them, that we can say that and we know it in our heads. I pray that it would really connect in their hearts, that they would experience the love of Jesus Christ. Your Word says that nothing can separate us from that love, nothing high or low, nothing in this world, nothing in our past or our future. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, and I pray that they would experience that in 2019. In Jesus name, amen. All right. Fly free.