

## IS THE COST TO LEAVE AN ABUSIVE MARRIAGE WORTH IT?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 128 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have with me Amie, and she is going to be sharing her story (we call them Butterfly Stories in the Flying Free Sisterhood group) of going through an emotional and spiritually abusive relationship and how she got out. Hopefully, we can learn some things through her experience. Welcome, Amie.

AMIE: Thank you so much, Natalie, for having me. I am so excited to tell my story. Your ministry has been one key that helped me get out, so it is nice to be able to give back.

NATALIE: That's awesome. I'm so happy to hear that. Why don't you start by telling us how you met your husband, and if you remember noticing any red flags? I know a lot of us didn't know what red flags were back then, but was there anything you noticed that was kind of off or that made you think there could be problems up ahead?

AMIE: I want to talk about that first. I didn't know. I think ignorance about behavior patterns is probably so negative for women. My conscience, my idea of domestic abuse, was informed by Hollywood. He comes home drunk, beats her up in the kitchen, and she has to go to the hospital. It took me so long, even when I was told I was being abused, to recognize that it was abuse. When I met him, I didn't have a clue about red flags or that it was even part of it. I met him at graduate school. He was the president of our graduate student association. Everybody liked him. He was everybody's friend. He was fun to be with. You get attracted to that kind of personality. There were things that, as time went on, I thought, "This doesn't feel normal." But initially, not a clue.

NATALIE: How long did you date, and when did you get married then?

AMIE: I was raised Christian but not living as a Christian. We met my first week in graduate school. He had been there already. We were dating within that first week. Our relationship became sexual immediately. He pushed and pushed for it. One of his favorite stories was to tell everyone that I asked him out and that I was the aggressive one. I'm always like, "No." To this day, that is what he tells people. There is something about his image that he wants everyone to know that I pursued him. I chased him. I'm like, "No, none of that is true." I ended up pregnant and went home from grad school and

did not want to marry him. My parents were believers and bless my dad's heart, (he's passed away, and now my mom is mad at him and going to have a conversation with him when she goes to heaven,) but he said, "You are burning with lust." You know that passage that says, "You are burning with lust. You have to get married." I said, "But dad, I don't want to marry him." He said, "No, you have to." You're a young woman and you think, "I've already screwed everything up. So I'd better do the right thing now." So I married him. Right away he was very good at... First, he never told me he had already gotten a girl pregnant, or that anything had happened before. He'd done this before. But I was not given any of that information. If I asked him about what happened before, he would get angry and say, "You're so insecure. Stop worrying about the past. I'm here now." I was never allowed to find out. We had been married four or five years before I even found that information out.

NATALIE: Wow! That's incredible.

AMIE: Yep. Totally lied about it and covered it up. I didn't even have all the full information because I would have totally not done it. Almost the week after we got married, he had his parents pay... We were dirt poor. He had his parents pay for him to go to some friends' wedding. I was pregnant and just married. I said, "Don't go. Please don't go." I begged him. "Why are you being so dramatic? It's just a weekend away." So off he went. I cried the whole time he was gone. That was back before cell phones and internet. I think he called me once and put me down because I was upset. When he got back, I was "ridiculous. I was overreacting." That was the beginning of my feelings never counting. They were always ridiculous. What he saw and how he felt were the only things that mattered. But you don't know it. You think, "I am female. I am overreacting. I got really upset over something that was a three-day weekend away." But now that I look back, I can see that was the beginning. In anything, I was not his equal. I wasn't even a person most of the time.

NATALIE: How did you cope? You ended up having a lot of kids too. That was just the first of many.

AMIE: Right. I had her. I tried to leave him at about four years of marriage when I found out he had done it all before, and I felt betrayed. I tried to leave him and ended up going back. When I came back, he told me if I ever tried to do it again, he would make sure I never saw my daughter again and then proceeded to have sex with me. At the time, you don't realize you are being threatened and bullied. You think he's just being insecure. You make up excuses in your mind for why they are that way. They have an anger problem. They have a sex problem. They are insecure. Because that is what they tell

you. "You don't understand me. If you just met my needs." So you're a kind-hearted person and you are loving, so you think, "I need to be a better wife. I need to do these things better." So I stayed, probably out of fear, not recognizing it as fear then. So coping strategies? A lot of avoidance. I would try to avoid. You are tending to his feelings, so you are avoiding conversations. You are avoiding arguments. You're avoiding getting undressed in your own bedroom because he is slurping over you and demanding sex all the time. You are avoiding... When he would go on work trips, I would be like, "Phew. Relief." But I didn't put it all together. It took me twenty-nine years to finally get to my end, where he wore me down.

NATALIE: Did you ever...? A lot of Christian women will spiritualize the abuse or put a spiritual spin on it so that they feel better about it? "God wants me to do this." Or "Because I'm suffering for God, I'm going to get extra brownie points in heaven." Or I don't know what. Did you do any of that?

AMIE: Absolutely. Being raised Christian but not living Christian—going through all of that—my heart got turned back to God. I wanted to live for Him. I was basically living with an unsaved man, so you read all those scriptures about winning him over without the word. You are supposed to shut your mouth and just do what you're supposed to do. I was darn good at that—like really good at it. The other coping mechanism would be over-functioning because he made me 100% responsible for everything in the relationship, everything in the family, everything in the home, all the children, everything. You work because you have this idea that he plants in you—if you would just do better, if you would achieve this, then everything would be good between us. Don't complain. One thing he loved to do... I'm not a morning person, but when you raise that many children, I like to joke that I had twenty years of sleep deprivation. I would finally get to sleep at 4:00am getting the baby down, and he thought I should be up at 5:00am with him because he was an early riser. He would always put me down and belittle me about that. I would say, "Are you kidding me? My best sleep is from 6:00-8:00am, which is sometimes the only sleep I would get at night." He would say, "The kids would be better off if I got them up at 5:00am and then you got up at 6:00am and they'd be all ready to go." I would say, "I can't do that." It was an ongoing thing of pressure that I wasn't enough all the time. Spiritualizing it, you love God and you're trying to serve Him with your whole heart, so you are reading your scripture. I had this stack of marriage books next to my bed. Probably the only one that I didn't adopt fully was the Pearls because I was like, "I am not a Jezebel. I'm not taking that. If I've been home all day, he shouldn't sit down on the couch like he used to and not help out." I didn't totally swallow that entire thing. But I was in the early homeschooling movement. The gentle spirit movement where you were supposed to home birth, home garden, home school, home everything

—and do it really well. Spiritualization was, “I’m supposed to submit. He’s not saved. I’m supposed to win him over without the words.” So when I bring up problems and he gets upset and we have these hour-long circular conversations, it is my fault because I opened my mouth. Spiritually a lot. The church teachings and even the homeschooling movement during those years said, “Women are only in the home. You don’t have a say, so if he says it, it goes.” So yes, very spiritualized.

NATALIE: Right. At what point did you start waking up and realizing this was abusive? Did you ever hear that term abuse and start thinking it might apply to your relationship?

AMIE: No. What had to happen... Ten years before I knew what was going on, I started having physical symptoms. I’m a strong, healthy person. I started having tremors and nightmares. I would fly off the handle at the kids. So I was going to doctors—endocrinologists – “What’s wrong with me?” All the medical tests would come back fine. So there was physical debilitation starting ten years. It took me ten years to absolutely deteriorate so badly to the point... We’d been married twenty-nine years. That last summer, I was so depressed. I thought, “I’m the problem. I need to get rid of the problem.” I was ready to kill myself.

NATALIE: Yes. I hear that so much.

AMIE: It’s awful that they bring you to that point. You think, “I’m the problem.” So this is harming my children. But there was some brief flicker that said, “If I’m not here, what will happen to the children?” Because he didn’t parent. He didn’t think about them. He didn’t plan for them. He didn’t educate them. Nothing. So that flicker said, “I can’t do this. I need to get help.” Right then, because of what church we were going to, I said, “I’m not going to the church. No way.” I looked up on Focus on the Family, crying and hoping to find help, and they had someone listed in my area who was a licensed professional and a woman. Those were the things that I wanted. I made an appointment to go see her. Bless her heart, she was a godsend. I walked in and she said, “Tell me why you’re here.” I cried, “I can’t cope with my life! I am messing up everything.” That is where we started. She listened to me for a while. There was a pause in all the pouring out. She said, “Amie, you know you’re being abused, right?” I was in shock. I was in shock because I thought, “No! He just has an anger problem. He has a sex problem. This isn’t abuse!” I was so far gone. In my head I thought, “She’s crazy. I’m not coming back.” This is where I was at, so I left. But the person I am thought, “Okay, I’m going to see what she’s really saying. What does domestic abuse look like?” So I started secretly online. He left for a trip, so I started looking it up. I started a list of what the patterns of behavior were. The shock was... I could check off every single one that he had done to me repeatedly. I sat there

and got physically ill. I made another appointment to go back to the counselor. When I went back, I said, "You're right. What do we do now?" That day, she sent me to the police because I said, "I don't want him in the house. I don't want to see him." She said, "You've got to go to the police," because he's put his fist through doors before. He held me down. He tried to choke me. There are things he had done that I just thought were anger. She wanted me to go to the police to get some advice on how to safeguard myself and my kids because I was going to say, "You need to leave." That was a weird experience. Within two weeks of starting counseling... The family always went away on Labor Day weekend. The night before we left, I went to him and said, "The kids and I are going to go camping, but you're not coming, and you're going to be moved out by the time we get back." These are the two things he said. "Well, how did we get here?" Then he instantly switched and started crying and said, "Are you going to take my kids away from me?"

NATALIE: Wow.

AMIE: There are people who know the story and are shocked that he just moved out, but I think I caught him off guard. He still thought he had control. That's how I found out. That's how I started getting out. By the time I got to that point, and it all clicked, I thought, "This all makes sense now. It all finely makes sense."

NATALIE: Yeah. Once you hear the truth, the pieces all come together. Then it's just a matter of... I think that's what makes us feel so sick. Now that we're faced with the truth, we're also faced with this decision that we must make. What are we going to do with the truth? That is very frightening.

AMIE: It was frightening. What now? I can remember driving home from one of the first couple of sessions, and I thought, "Fine, God. Now I'm going to be the divorced mother of nine."

NATALIE: Right! Your dream come true, right? Since you were a kid.

AMIE: It's what I was working for. That terrified me. What am I going to do? I still have five minor children. How am I going to take care of myself and them? I haven't worked for thirty years. All that went through my mind.

NATALIE: So what did you do? What happened next?

AMIE: I got advice right away, both from my counselor and my aunt, who'd been through a nasty divorce. I said, "What do I do with him? He's out of the house, but here I have these little kids." I have one daughter who has been diagnosed with general anxiety disorder. We now know in retrospect a lot of that was caused because of things going on in the home. But she was eleven. I thought, "She needs her dad. She'll feel terrible." They recommended that I still let him come. We homeschooled Monday through Thursdays, so I let him come Friday, and I would leave the house. I still did Sunday dinners because I was that "good Christian wife," right?

NATALIE: Wow!

AMIE: He had freedom to call them up and ask them to go. I initially said, "Look, I've been in the middle making your relationship with kids happen. I'm out. It's up to you now." I told the kids, "Mom is going to be a better mom without him around." I still had a few adult children living in the house. That first year was rough. I didn't file for divorce. I don't believe in divorce. God hates divorce. You get that drilled into you. So I thought, "Maybe we can just live this way and live separate and he can just stay away and see the kids until I get them grown."

NATALIE: Yeah, because God is fine with abuse. He's fine with separation forever and ever, but divorce, no. That's where He draws the line.

AMIE: Exactly. But things got better at home. We had peace at home. Some of my adult kids would say, "Mom, you are so much better now." Now I know I had complex PTSD and would fly off the handle at them about stupid things. They said, "Mom, you're so much better now. We trust you. We can talk to you. It's going so well." That worked for three years. Then the rest of the story is that my second son always struggled with a lot of things. He was struggling because he was twenty-four, living in my house still, had a long-term girlfriend, and was working part-time jobs. But that spring, I said, "You're twenty-four. Get out of my house." I almost said it that way. I said, "Get a full-time job. Get insurance. Ask her to marry you. Move on." He did not like change ever, so I think he was struggling. I pieced this together later because at the time you don't know what is going on. But that July, he went and had lunch with his father. From that moment on, my son, who had been loving and kind and whom I probably leaned on too much, flipped. I became an unforgiving person. I should just let it go after all this time. He started talking to me this close to my face, like his father used to, and screaming at me in my space. When I tried to deal with it, he would just tell his brothers and sisters that I was crazy and unforgiving. I found out later he was getting all of them together behind my back over at his brother's house, and they were airing their grievances. He was pushing a



narrative about me that dad was the victim. He had been handed a lens of how to view me from his dad. They grew up in that. They grew up with the eyeball rolling about mom, "There she goes again. She's having one of her episodes." They had been groomed all their lives, and I didn't know it and they didn't know it. So he handed them this lens that "he's been the victim and that she won't forgive me, and I've apologized" (which was never true.) So he began, with his father's help along with some others in the Christian community that we were a part of, a smear campaign. He even went to my mother, who knows me well, and said, "I'm doing God's work. You have to join us." She said, "You shut your mouth. You're going to hurt so many people." But he didn't. They were doing this while I was still shopping for most of them, spending tons of money and tons of time, still homeschooling, still putting on Christmas for them, for goodness sakes. You have a family. You know the labors that you do to make everything work. Christmas night... I finally had to ask him to move out because he was still at home. I said, "You've got to move out. I've lived with one abusive man. I can't do this." So he moved out, and of course, I was the crazy one. He went to that pastor of my church with his father. We'd been going to a separate church for three years. My son got his dad, my estranged husband, and the pastor listened to him. At the time I thought, "What do I do? I've tried to talk to him myself. I've tried to get other people. I should go to the pastor, right? That is step three in Matthew 18, right?" I went into the pastor's office, not knowing he had already been groomed. I sat there, and he told me how... This is what he said to me. He said, "In a family, it is like a wagon wheel. You are the center of all the spokes, and you're not being forgiving. So if you work on forgiveness, the rest of your family will be okay." He blamed me.

NATALIE: Wow. So the problem is not the problem. The problem is that you're not overlooking the problem. You need to overlook the problem and then it's okay.

AMIE: And get over it. By Christmas night, so many other things happened. I knew... Long story, but the first counselor, my oldest daughter wanted to go to counseling, but I couldn't afford both. So I sent her, and I stopped going. By that time, my mental health was going downhill. I was so distressed, fully triggered by CPTSD. The next morning after Christmas, I called my mom and said, "Mom, I need help now. I need help today. I'm going to lose my mind. I'm not doing well." We immediately got me in to see a doctor who got me on meds, immediately got me to see the counselor in the doctor's office. She saved my life that day. I started treatment; I was doing well. But this stuff was still going on with my son. Two weeks later, they decided with the advice of two different pastors that they should do an intervention. So seven of my children one night... He had come over that morning and said things that just pushed my buttons, and I lost it. They decided that was the time. Seven of my kids came into my house, including the son who

was not allowed in my home without my permission. I told them I would listen. I have three big sons. They are all over six feet. One was 17 at the time. My son had coached them what to say and do. They came into my room and shut the door. My youngest son, who is 6'5", stood in front of the door. My other two sons stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of me and would not let me leave because I said, "I don't want this son here. He's got to leave. I will listen to what the rest of you say, but he's got to leave." They said, "No!" I had no rights. I had to sit there and take it. They were going to tell me the way things were. These are the things they said, "We demand that you get treatment." I said, "I'm already getting treatment." They said, "We demand you get put on medicine." I said, "I'm already on medicine." They said, "You have to do things the way we say it or you're dangerous and we're all moving out." Here is one thing I remember clearly. I picked up my Bible and gave it to my son. I said, "Son, show me in here that what you are doing right now is according to what God would have you do." He handed the Bible back to me and said, "Love keeps no record of wrongs." So where I was at then, I was in a total distressed state. I can think about that now. What was he doing? He was keeping records of whatever imagined and probably some real wrongs that he felt I had done to him. They did that for an hour and a half until I was on the floor crying. They left me. I immediately called my mom. I made it through the night somehow, but I said, "I've got to go to the hospital, mom. I'm in such a bad way I need to go to the hospital." I went to the hospital. They said, "You can check yourself in and you can check yourself out." That is not true. Don't believe them. Don't go to the hospital. Go to the crisis center if you are having stuff like that because in the hospital the behavioral mental health units basically make you a prisoner, and it creates worse situations for you. So I was traumatized, and I was re-traumatized. While I was gone, two good things happened. It became clear that my soon-to-be-ex was trying to get me committed so that I would lose all my children because he kept calling the doctor in the hospital to give evidence that I was crazy. I had told my physician in the hospital that he's estranged, and I didn't want him involved in my case at all. Thankfully, she listened to me. She examined me for over two-and-a-half hours. She said, "Amie, you have complex-PTSD. Your entire family is messed up, and everyone needs help." That diagnosis probably saved me through the rest of the time I had to go through. I had to go through parental alienation of the worst kind. I had to go through a messy divorce. But I had that diagnosis, so I knew I wasn't crazy. It's something that had been done to me. That was huge. The other thing that happened is that all my adult children moved out and wouldn't tell me where they were.

NATALIE: Did you like that? I'm thinking, "Gosh, I'd be so happy. They're all gone. Peace." How did you feel about that?



AMIE: Terrible, because you're the problem. So I was still trying to recover from this traumatic event, and I was testing. I said, "Can we please get together in a neutral spot with counselors and start working on what the problems are? I really want to work on whatever this problem is." My nightmare went from bad to worse at that point, but it's a good story at the end.

NATALIE: What happened at the end?

AMIE: At the end, I'm out. I'm free. I go to sleep safe. I wake up safe. Those are the good things.

NATALIE: How long ago, to give us a timeframe, how far out are you? When was your divorce finalized?

AMIE: My divorce wasn't finalized until two years ago. He moved out seven years ago. It was three years of relative peace and my children and I building relationships. It was a year of total hell, and then another year of him prolonging the divorce. These last two years totally break up child visitation.

NATALIE: Did he succeed in getting your kids away from you?

AMIE: He got seven of them because once that all happened, and even though I said, "Please, let's all go to therapy. Let's get help," most of them immediately shut me off. Two of my daughters, I haven't heard their voices in three years. They won't talk to me.

NATALIE: That's so sad. I'm so sorry.

AMIE: Yeah, so that Christmas I emailed you and you were having something... Your email was, "I'm so sorry." I can't tell you how much those words, somebody saying, "I feel your pain." That was huge to me. Anyway, a couple of other little details. They got through the church, a total conflict of interest, this family counselor from the church who had a master's degree. She was licensed. Two days after I got out of the hospital (I still had my own counselor) she made me sign release forms that the pastor at the church who had already victimized me - he showed up. I had never asked him to be there. I told her outright, "I don't feel comfortable with him here. I want him to leave." Three times. She said, "No, no. He's part of this." She forced me to sit there and have him in the meeting (that's a whole other story). I went to her five times because she promised we were going to have family counseling and get my kids in, but what she was doing was mining me for information. She was talking to four of my adult kids, and she asked my husband

to come in against my permission, against my will. One of the last sessions I had with her, she said, "You need to suck it up. If you have problems with your children, you shut your mouth, you go to your room, and you write in your journal." I thought, "This isn't how my other counselor treats me."

NATALIE: Oh my word! How can that even be legal for a counselor to treat a client like that? That is unbelievable.

AMIE: Then she told me she was seeing my husband, and I needed to learn to parent with him. Eventually, I filed complaints against her that took two years before the state... They finally reprimanded her because of course she was so personality disordered herself. Completely illegal. Completely inappropriate. They sent her a warning letter. I wanted her license taken away because if she did it to me, she probably did it to other people.

NATALIE: Yes. No doubt.

AMIE: I had that going on too. Literally, it was this minefield. What finally triggered me to get a divorce was that he was getting bolder and bolder because he had gotten all these kids on his side. He had convinced all these people he was victimized and got all these pastors. He came to my house in June of that year, 2018. He stood on the back porch and started pounding his fist on the railing and screaming at me, saying he had rights to the girls (because I still had two girls at home) and rights to the house. He was going to get them. I talked to my counselor and said, "I've got to go through divorce to protect me and the girls. I must. He's starting to do this." A week later when I gave him... I wanted to go through mediation. We didn't have that many assets. We just had the two kids. We had two cars and a house. That's all we owned. I said, "This could be mediated. We'd only spend maybe \$2500. He'll be reasonable," because I'm still trying to hold it all together.

NATALIE: Yeah, no.

AMIE: I gave him the name of the mediator, who was a woman, and he said, "Why are we doing this now?" I said, "Because you threatened me a week ago." He looked me in the eye and said, "Amie, that never happened."

NATALIE: Oh my word!

AMIE: I said, "Here's why we're at the place we're at. Because 98% of what you do to me never happened, and I remember all of it."

NATALIE: That is the quintessential gaslighting. It makes you crazy.

AMIE: Totally. We went to mediation. He undermined all that. His crowning moment... I tell people... You know that moment in the movie The Lord of the Rings where Gollum convinced Frodo that Sam has been stealing the food and Frodo says, "Go away, Sam." Gollum turns around with that smile. That is exactly the face that he had at mediation when he started demanding that the two girls would have to live with him fifty percent of the time. I asked, "Why would you do that?" and he puts that smile on and says, "Because I have seven children who say that you're a terrible mother." It was his crowning achievement. I laugh now because I think, "What is wrong with you?" He undermined mediation, so I had no choice but to file for divorce. The minute I filed for divorce, he evaded being served. He opened a secret bank account and started syphoning money out of our joint account. Behind my back, he signed for my son's apartment, a \$16,000 liability, but wouldn't give one of the girls still living with me money to get her dental work done. Thing after thing after thing. I had read on your site so many of these classic things. I was sitting in astonishment saying, "He's doing all of them."

NATALIE: Yep.

AMIE: He dragged it out. He lied in court documents. I tried to get an assessment so my daughters could have a voice and just be able to say, "This is what I want." Any female he can undermine their ability to reason and think. He's good at it. He's a skilled liar. We went through a year of that. There was a lot of mitigated damage control. I finally got it where they could stay with me mostly, and we had a parental plan that they would go every other weekend to his house. I was lucky. You helped me a lot with that. You said, "They don't have to live full time with him." I thought, "Okay. We can live with this. We can function." So yeah, we got through it.

NATALIE: How old is your youngest right now?

AMIE: She's 15. In the state I live in, Idaho, the state does not give any children any kind of say so over their lives until they are 18. So that was one negotiation I did. I wanted them to be at will. He agreed to them being 17. So she has a year and a half until she can say yes or no to wanting to go.

NATALIE: And who is living with you now?

AMIE: Just the two youngest. My 18-year-old is graduating this next month. She is getting on her feet. She's the one with anxiety. She is so much healthier now. My youngest is doing well. She's got a good counselor who helps her through having to be at his place because he is a nightmare still.

NATALIE: Right. They don't change. What blows me away is how the system—the entire system—is set up to accommodate the kinds of dysfunctional people. It does not just ruin the partner; it ruins the lives of... Even those older kids who have turned on you, their lives... They are dysfunctional now because the system enabled their dad. Instead of bringing out the truth... It's like someone who is a thief being able to get away with it. Of course, what are they going to do? More people will come and say, "Hey, I want to do that too. It pays to be a thief." The system must stand up against these dysfunctional people who are ruining people's lives. But it's not that way yet. In the meantime, the only recourse we have is to get ourselves out and do damage control. And that's all we can do. Then we hope those older kids will someday get the therapy and healing they need in their life's journey.

AMIE: I agree with you. I think initially I got more help outside of the church, outside the household of faith, than I did within. I watched tons of Patrick Doyle videos; I did so many that I started getting help within the household of faith. The world is better at that. But when you get to family court, it's like they are light years behind where they need to be to understand what is going on.

NATALIE: Yep, they are. It's so sad. I was going to say, do you have any regrets? But I'm guessing that you don't.

AMIE: There are tons of regrets like you wish you'd never met him, you wish you'd never married him, but in terms of getting out, no—not one. I feel bad that there is fallout. Your kids end up being collateral damage. I have two of them who, after three years, one we've been going to counseling and we are slowly getting better. And my son, he's a guy. Guys are different. We are slowly starting to just be nice. But it's a long road. It's going to be a long road for them to ever piece together the truth because there is groupthink going on, there is reinforcement from the church. The churches we've been to... I know some of your story about that, but ours were about federal headship. So you are nothing if you are married. If you divorce, you have committed the mortal sin. In fact, I had one son tell me I was married eternally to his father. I thought, "Okay. No, I'm not."

NATALIE: Hey, if you're in Idaho, what church did you...? You guys weren't part of Doug Wilson's church, were you?

AMIE: Oh, that whole denomination, yes.

NATALIE: You were.

AMIE: So beware. I know horror stories from other women.

NATALIE: My ex-husband's sister and husband were members of his church for years and worked for that business, that homeschooling business that was a branch of the church. So I have weird connections there too. I've been out there.

AMIE: Those stories are for another day. They hand out to couples Love and Respect. They hand that book out if they come to them for marriage counseling.

NATALIE: Yeah, when I ended up leaving my relationship, I got an interesting email from my in-laws telling me about all the reasons why I was a bad person. They did it in a very loving way. You know, loving in quotes. It was very loving, kind, and spiritual and holy and everything. But they haven't talked to me since.

AMIE: Because I went through so much grief at the parental alienation, and they took my grandkids away too.

NATALIE: Oh no!

AMIE: At one point, the son who had been the spearhead behind it, he told me I was an idolator because I loved my children more than God. I looked at him and said, "You have got to be kidding me, son. You are not a parent. To lose a child at any stage in life in whatever fashion breaks a mom's heart." But I was labeled an idolator.

NATALIE: Wow. So you went through severe abuse of every kind, including spiritual abuse. I think the spiritual abuse is the worst because it ties God in with satanic activity.

AMIE: Actually, I emailed you once. You helped me a lot with that. You get where you are pleading with God for all those years to fix your husband and your situation. I did a lot of fawning with my husband. "Please listen to me. Let's try to fix this." You feel like that with God. I went through some serious dark waters there of who really is God? Who is He to me? How could a loving, heavenly Father stand there while this guy was doing this stuff

to me? I've had a lot of roads to go through with that, and I'm still working on that. It's like I tell my daughter, the days I am really angry with God and am telling Him so, at least I'm still talking to Him.

NATALIE: Right. I had to go through the same thing. I'm still working through some things. It's going to be a process to heal from all of this. I think a lot of us view God as abusive. We associated abuse with love. Even though something felt strange about it, that was all we knew. So we have to separate all that out. God is not like that. He is not condoning any of that. Let's close this. I know you've been part of my group, the Flying Free Sisterhood. How did the group help you as far as your healing? What would you say to someone who is thinking about joining the group as far as how it might be able to help them?

AMIE: Well, one piece of advice is to get out, especially if you've been in a Christian conservative lifestyle for any amount of time. I would really encourage women to get help outside. Get help outside. You may lose all that community—which I did, and it's scary—but you need help from outside, someone who can be objective for you and who is informed on trauma and on this type of covert domestic abuse. You need so much to be believed and to be validated. Number one, I'd say for them to get out. Your group, your ministry, your articles, your classes—when I first signed up, you sent out that e-book that was a workbook. It was so foreign to me, but I look at it as that first step of trying to get my brain rewired to not be in that terrible place anymore. It was effective because you'd have a scripture, and then you'd have us say how we felt that day. It was really good. Having that help to be rewired... You literally must deprogram your mind. That is hard work, but it is possible to get out of that. So first, you need something outside and second, something that will help you be believed, feel validated, and be supported. I think I've emailed you twice, and you always emailed me back. It's a short sentence, like when I was struggling with God and you said, "Go read the Psalms and John." I thought, "I can do that." You gave me something I could do that was simple because some days surviving is all you can do, but it's a good day that you do. So those two things.

NATALIE: It's funny because, as you mentioned, those little journal things were the very beginning when I first started trying to think, "What has helped me? What could I do to help other women?" That was like the infant of my program when it was just a tiny little baby. It has expanded so much more than that. You've been around for a long time.

AMIE: Well, three years.



NATALIE: Okay.

AMIE: I haven't had as much time as others to interact with the online group. I would have liked that. But God provided for me in-person stuff, and that's been helpful.

NATALIE: Good. I think that's always the best if you can get it. Not everyone can get that, but that's amazing. I'm so grateful for your willingness to come and share your story. That's a painful story to tell. For a mom with all that kid stuff, that is agonizing.

AMIE: I tell people I survived what he did to me. There is a certain thing you survive. But the thing happened with my kids that broke me, and it is God having to put the pieces back together. The thing that comforts me a lot... I never thought of it before I started reading through John so much, but Jesus went to heaven with scars. He comes back and says, "Here, touch the hole." He went to heaven with scars, so why did I think I would not have scars and wounds that have been healed over. So that has been a comfort to me. He knows exactly what that feels like.

NATALIE: Right. I don't know how God is going to redeem all this or what beautiful things He is going to bring of it. Many of us haven't seen a lot of that. We've seen little glimpses of it. But I believe that if God is love as He says He is, and if He is powerful, that He will—He must—redeem this – for all of us, even for our abusers, for our children who have rejected us and done horrible things to us because that's who God is. He is way bigger than what we've been taught. It's interesting because we've been taught about the glory of God and the sovereignty of God, and what they are actually teaching is a very small, petty, diabolical little Roman god with a small "g", right? It's like, "Yeah, I don't think I want that. I don't believe in that god anymore. My God is so much bigger than that because my God wins in the end." He wins everything. He wins all of it, not just the little scraps and crumbs of it. He wins everything, and you are part of that. All the women listening are part of that. It's like an epic battle, like Lord of the Rings and The Chronicles of Narnia. This is an epic battle of good and evil. We have to fight our little skirmishes on our fronts but keep fighting.

AMIE: Thank you so much for that. That has really come home to me how much of a spiritual battle this is because the evil, the deceit, the lying, and the ability to deceive even the elect I think is so great in my situation. When you are at your worst, why are you being the one having to go through this? A lot of it is because Christ is in you, so even though you don't feel like it, you don't see it, it is because it is a spiritual battle. A woman who is struggling can just hold on to that. What happens if...? I haven't seen a lot of fallout for my children, but I know God is faithful to them. So you see them, and it

seems like their lives are going on fine, and you're the one still going to counseling and having to work on everything. But that's because it's a spiritual battle. We still have Jesus in us.

NATALIE: Yes. I think they look fine on the outside because there's a deception there. They're not really fine. They're not fine at all.

AMIE: Right. That will finally come to pass. I've gone from the hurt that they caused, the terrible hurt, to compassion and praying for them differently. "Lord, rescue them. You rescued me. It took a long time, and they are my stubborn children because they follow me. So rescue them too."

NATALIE: Yes. Amen.

AMIE: Thank you, Natalie.

NATALIE: Yes. This has been fun. Thank you to all of you listening. If you would do me a favor and head over to Apple iTunes and leave a rating and review if you haven't already. Those of us who produce this podcast would be so grateful. We love to go read those, and they also help others find this podcast. Thanks again for listening. Until next time, fly free!