

## Changing Your Role (Chapter Eight of Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage) Part Two

*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 147 of the Flying Free Podcast. This episode is a Part Two. It's a continuation of our episode from last week, which was 100 and episode... 100 and episode?! My gosh. This is the kind of thing where I should erase this and start over again, but I'm not going to because I have already started this over so many times and you know what? You guys need to know that I do lots of flubs. I wish I had saved all of them and we could do a podcast that's just all the bloopers, but I didn't. I just delete and start over. But I'm going to keep this one in there because it's kind of fun. Anyway, this is part two. Last week in Episode 146, I started reading chapter eight of my book "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," and I have it on sale for 99 cents. I was going to just have it on sale for 99 cents on Kindle through November 29th, Cyber Monday, but I've decided to just keep it going for another week, okay? So, we're going to listen to the last half of chapter eight. If you want to listen to the first half or if you're brand new around these parts and you've never heard of me before and you've never listened to any other podcast episodes, then you're kind of jumping into the middle of something. I would say don't listen to this one right now. Go to Episode 146 and listen to that one first, and then you can come over here and listen to this one. That way, it's all one seamless chapter. This is chapter eight of my book, "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage." Here we go!

### Your Responsibility to Choose

"Make a decision inside of yourself—a deep decision—that you are 100% responsible for your actions and he is 100% responsible for his actions. You have zero responsibility for what he does, and he has zero responsibility for what you do....When men blame women for their own behavior, that's one of the benchmarks of abuse." —Lundy Bancroft, "Daily Wisdom for Why Does He Do That?"

How would our lives be different if, instead of being people pleasers (an impossible and stressful task), we made the decision to zero in on aligning ourselves with God's view of us and our lives? What would happen if we saw ourselves as adults with God-given power and responsibility to steward our own lives? I'm talking about asking yourself some important questions like: "Who is responsible for my life?" "How will I share

power in my marriage relationship?" "If I begin to act like an autonomous adult in my relationship, what do I risk losing, and am I willing to risk that?"

The fact is, God gave each of us one life to be responsible for: our own. We make decisions for ourselves every single day. We may decide to maintain peace in our marriage by not rocking the boat, going along with whatever our spouse decides for us, and refusing to vulnerably engage on a deeper level out of fear of being attacked. We may decide not to push against emotional and spiritual abuse because we want the marriage to work out no matter what the cost to our spiritual, emotional, and physical health. We may choose to go with the flow out of fear our spouse will hurt us even more deeply than we've already been hurt. Maybe we're afraid if we make an effort to change, our religious community will reject and shame us. But the first step in creating change in our lives is to acknowledge that we do have choices, we do make choices, and they are our own choices.

There are many reasons we choose to keep things status quo, and sometimes these reasons are good ones. Sometimes we have very little choice, especially when children are involved. But often, we have more choices than we are willing to admit, and we may not be aware of our ability to change in small increments, slowly rewiring our brains, learning new skills in how to relate to abusive people and groups, and awakening to our own value as daughters of God. Change almost never occurs overnight. More often, it takes place quietly in the small, imperceptible things we alter slightly every single day. This is the kind of change I'd like to challenge you to pursue. In this way, over the period of one year, five years, and ten years, you will change the entire course of your life. In order to make these kinds of changes, you may need to think a little differently than you have in the past. Here are some important truths emotional abuse survivors have told me they had to learn in order to start making some pivotal changes in their lives.

1. You don't need the agreement, approval, or permission of other human beings to steward your life before God. God isn't going to hold any of those people accountable for your life. He's going to hold them accountable for their lives, and He's going to hold you accountable for yours. Remember the biblical parable of the talents? A man went away on a trip and entrusted his servants with varying amounts of talents. The faithful ones invested their money and doubled it, but one simply hid his to keep it safe because he was afraid of losing it. When the owner came home, he didn't penalize the ones who chose to invest their money just because one chose to do nothing with his. Nor did he let the one who chose to do nothing off the hook because the others invested well. He rewarded the ones who took the initiative to make choices and exercise their power, and he penalized the one who did nothing out of fear. We need

to stop looking sideways at others to see if they are okay with us or not. Their opinions don't matter. We live for an audience of One: Jesus Christ. And with Him, there is no fear. Go out and invest whatever He has entrusted you with in full freedom.

2. It's okay to be human and make mistakes. Survivors are often paralyzed with fear that they will make a wrong move and lose the love and acceptance of their spouse, their church, and even God. But God says love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). When we know we are loved no matter what, we are free to choose a path without letting fear stop us. It's true that you may lose the love and acceptance of your spouse and church community, but could you really call that love in the first place? When people only love you because you do what they dictate, that's not love, and you haven't really lost anything but the fantasy that they actually cared. Hopefully, there will be a few people in your life who love you no matter what. People who will eagerly support you as you learn to take personal control and come into the fullness of your adult identity as God intended.

3. When you come to a fork in the road, it's not always the path to heaven or the path to hell. Sometimes it's two equally viable options. And guess what: if nothing can separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, then you can rest assured He will walk with you on either path. So many Christians stand at the crossroads over and over in their lives, wavering in doubt and fear. This isn't gospel freedom. If an abuse victim has the opportunity to make a choice to stay or get out, she gets to decide which path to take for her own life. Both of those paths will be dark and painful for a while. But it isn't the responsibility or personal business of others to decide what is best for her and her children. As Christians, our role in the lives of others is a supporting role. A loving role. A "let me sit in the messy darkness with you so you're not alone" role. We do not have a "I'm going to take it upon myself to be the boss and judge of you" role. That's not the gospel, and that's not Christian love or community.

4. You cannot know the future; therefore, you cannot make decisions based on predictions of that unknown future. The past is the best predictor of the future anyway. So either way, you can only make choices based on your reality right now. If you've been living in an emotionally abusive relationship for ten years and nothing has changed, your best prediction of how life will be in ten more years is that it will be the same—except for what you choose to do about it today. It's tempting to believe a miracle could happen, and God could change your abuser. Could that happen? It isn't outside the realm of possibility, but it is statistically rare because, first of all, abuse is deeply rooted in ideology and entitled attitudes toward women, and secondly, abusers don't believe they have a problem that needs changing. Of course God can do

anything. He can make pink unicorns fly across rainbows. But He doesn't choose to control people. He invites, but He never coerces. And neither should we. Your best bet when choosing what to do regarding your abusive relationship is to make decisions based on reality rather than wishful thinking.

Learning how to make decisions for your life is a messy and meandering journey, especially if you've been steeped in the toxic belief that you are like a child or just a dumb, easily misled female. One of the first steps to getting started on this journey toward confident adulthood is knowing who you really are. Because your abuser has it all wrong.

### **Discovering Your True Identity**

I grew up in a conservative Christian home believing God loved me. In fact, I often felt that I was one of His favorites, if God could have favorites. The reason for this is that I was subjected to severe emotional, verbal, and even physical bullying in my neighborhood and at school for several of my formative years because I was openly Christian. As a child, I would read the Psalms and relate to David's fleeing to the shadow of God's wings to hide from his enemies. I believed that, just as David was the apple of God's eye even though many humans hated him, so I could be the apple of God's eye if I remained faithful and put my hope in God. I shared my faith in Jesus with everyone I knew, and I counted it a privilege to suffer rejection for His sake. As an adult, I look back on that little girl and wonder at her unwavering faith. My identity was rooted in how I believed God saw me; but as I grew older and became more steeped in oppressive and legalistic religion, that began to change.

Somewhere along the way, probably due to the influence of Bill Gothard, a popular Bible teacher our family learned from in the '70s, I began to associate God with human authority. In other words, if those humans in authority over me were pleased with me, then God was pleased with me. But if those in authority over me were displeased with me, then God was displeased with me as well. This applied to other relationships too. If I was at peace with people, I was doing well. If someone was unhappy with me, I must have done something wrong, and it was my duty to apologize, ask forgiveness, and let them off the hook for anything they had done that offended me. Give my everything. Take nothing. It was the perfect set-up for what would come later in my life.

I was an extremely conscientious child with a strong desire to please, so I made my decisions based on what I thought my parents would most approve of. When there was a conflict between another person and myself, I assumed it was my fault, apologized for it, asked forgiveness, and hoped I hadn't ruined my chances of being

loved by that person. Of course, I was a human being like everyone else, and as hard as I tried to be perfect and make everyone happy, I failed over and over again. I began to split my true self with all of my human weakness from my ideal self—the self I thought I needed to be in order to be loved and accepted. I was constantly saying I was sorry and begging for forgiveness. And because I couldn't maintain that perfection of my ideal self, I came to believe I could not be the apple of God's eye, after all. I was more like a thorn in His flesh.

I also came to believe that to be loved and accepted by God and others, I must always be nice. I think we should all strive to be empathic and kind, but being nice in the way I believed meant that I couldn't speak up, say no, or rock the boat by confronting bad behavior—especially when the bad behavior was perpetrated by someone in authority. Instead, I had to unconditionally forgive and love, which really meant that I had to accept being used by others. I had to accept being treated like a doormat.

Along with this was the belief that my opinions or observations meant nothing. My authority figure was always right just by virtue of the fact that they were in authority. That meant I was always wrong, even if I was right. The reality is that nobody is right all the time or wrong all the time, and everyone has a voice that deserves to be heard. But when you are immersed in this kind of teaching most of your life, it can eventually cause confusion along with troubling relationship issues down the road.

As an adult who has worked through a lot of this faulty thinking in therapy and studying, I have come to believe that God permits us to use our voices, to stay rooted in reality rather than magical thinking, and to stand against abusive behavior regardless of who is being abusive—including husbands and pastors. We may suffer for standing up for what is right, but contrary to what you may have heard, it is not a mark of spiritual maturity to suffer needlessly. Christianity is not a religion of asceticism. And as I've stated earlier, I believe our only authority as adults is Jesus Christ. My goal as a parent is to raise kids who understand that. They will answer to God alone one day, and in Christ, they are fully loved and completely safe to become exactly who they are and do what they are wired by Him to do with their lives. If others don't agree, that's their problem, and they can take it up with God. But I want my children to be free from spiritual abuse and the bondage of legalism. I want them to live by the law of love for God, themselves, and others. And that is how I am determined to live as well. This requires wisdom, not rules.

So what does this have to do with your identity? The point I want you to take away is that you are not defined by the opinions of those who have placed themselves in authority over you. You are defined by your Creator, and He says His creation of you is

good. You are good just as you are—an important human because you have an important Creator. You are good even if you make mistakes. You are good even if you fail at times. You are good to accept your limitations and refuse to spend your life trying to be like a perfect little god. You know what real humility is? It's accepting all this about yourself and your humanity and taking pleasure in just being a child of God, knowing you are loved and safe no matter what. If you could really just totally rest in this truth, you would experience real inner peace.

Spiritually healthy people are okay with themselves before God. They come boldly before the throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16). They see who they are through His eyes, not the eyes of those around them. And likewise, they are respectful of others being themselves, trusting that God has each of us on a separate journey. People who can't do this are desperately attempting to cover up their own shame by trying to be perfect themselves and expecting perfection from others. This covering up ruins relationships and unity in the body of Christ today just as it has all throughout history. It's pride. It's believing we can actually somehow get ourselves to a place where we are good with God by our efforts at being as perfect and godlike as possible.

I'd like to describe for you what I believe an authentic, healthy believer in Christ is like by looking at what they do and what they don't do. First, here's what they don't do:

- They don't idolize or put on a pedestal their families, husbands, or church communities. They have a good grasp on the fact that all these people are human beings who make mistakes and have problems.
- They don't honor men more than they honor God.
- They don't obey the letter of the law when it means hurting other human beings.
- They don't try to be perfect, and they are okay with their imperfections.
- They don't expect perfection of others.
- They don't live in paralyzing fear with every decision that needs to be made.
- They aren't afraid to speak out against injustice and deception even when it means standing alone and being ridiculed, slandered, shamed, and rejected.
- They don't live under debilitating, toxic shame.

- They don't chase after love and acceptance at the expense of their well-being because they already know they have all the love they will ever need in Christ.
- They don't try to attract the popular crowd or the spiritual people or any other group to make themselves feel good enough.
- They don't hate on themselves.
- They're not people-pleasers.

Here's what they do:

- They serve Jesus Christ alone.
- They honor God first, and then they show honor to all humans, acknowledging that human beings are made in the image of God.
- They live by the law of love.
- They accept their human limitations, weaknesses, and failures, and they revel in God's grace and love for them.
- They accept the human limitations, weaknesses, and failures of others without allowing others to use and abuse them.
- They respect the rights and boundaries of others while also respecting their own rights and boundaries.
- They make decisions while trusting God to help them walk through whatever the future holds.
- They let go of toxic relationships and build healthy relationships with people who want to mutually support and build one another up.
- They align themselves with God's view of them by letting go of shame and loving and accepting themselves as good enough because God made them and Christ died for them.
- They accept the responsibility God has given to them to carefully steward their own bodies, minds, and spirits in a way that will glorify God.

- They live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in the messiness of life on earth, applying grace where it is needed.

This is your true identity as a daughter of God. Again, not striving for perfection, but striving to love well with the foundational understanding that you are perfectly loved and accepted in Christ Jesus. In Him, you can fly free!

“If God is for us, who can be against us?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:31, 35-39)

### **From Helpless to Adult**

I flew out of my parent’s nest at age 18 and embarked on my journey toward adulthood. Like most young adults, I made mistakes, learned stuff, and grew in my adulting skills. It was a memorable time. And then I got married. Because I believed in traditional marriage roles, I worked hard to let go of my identity as “Natalie: adult woman” and embrace my new role as “So-and-so’s wife: follower/child/ underling.” There was a big problem, though. He wasn’t wired to be a leader, nor did he grow in this area. I remember hearing that if a husband would not take the initiative to lead (the rigid role our religious community wanted him to play), the wife would need to get down on her face, figuratively speaking—as low as she could go—to follow any slight movement he might make in any direction. So I did that, and guess where we went. Nowhere. I sometimes wonder how things would have been different if we had both subscribed to mutuality in marriage. If we had embraced the way God designed us and used our gifts and personalities to their fullest extent—blessing one another with those strengths and blessing the community and church we were part of in the same way. But we didn’t.

Instead, I had to become like a little girl/mother in the relationship in order to dutifully play the role assigned to me by my husband and religious community. This meant asking permission for everything. Trying to read my husband’s moods or desires in order to manage and meet them. Allowing my husband and church leaders to tell me what God wanted instead of listening to God for myself.



My marriage was dysfunctional from day one. I did reach out for help numerous times throughout the course of that 25-year marriage, but nobody was able to recognize the pathology because their power-over theology got in the way. Toward the end, God taught me a few life-changing things I'd like to pass on to you. We'll talk more about the things you can do to be personally free in chapter ten, but here is an overview.

1. You don't need to be rescued; you need to be empowered. This was huge for me. I had been literally begging people around me to rescue me. Why would I do that? Because I believed they were the adults, and I was the child that needed rescuing! When I first learned this truth, it was like a crack of lightning striking my brain. Everything was illuminated, and it finally clicked. I didn't need the permission of all my mommies and daddies (my husband, my friends, my church leaders) to change my life for the better. I was an adult woman, and I had a responsibility to make my own decisions about my safety and emotional and spiritual well-being. Just knowing this empowered me to stop complaining about my lot in life and begin taking steps in a new direction in spite of the abusive kickback from everyone around me.

2. Learn to tolerate the disapproval of people instead of feeling like a miserable nothing if someone doesn't like what you do. Again, this was a paradigm shift in my life. I had never learned this skill, but it's the key to being an adult! Nobody can make everyone happy. No matter what we do, there will be someone out there who disapproves, and they will probably let you know. This is uncomfortable, but it really is okay if people are unhappy with what you decide. You are okay even without their approval. The child inside us wants everyone to think we are good and right, but that's just not possible. We need to let go of this child-like pursuit of people-pleasing and accept the fact that sometimes our decisions will make others angry. This is another boundaries issue, and it isn't our place to manage the emotions of others. If they are angry, they must manage their own discomfort. Maybe they believe they have a right to come into your home and yard and control what you plant in your flower garden. When you tell them they don't, they may not like it, but that isn't your problem. It's theirs.

3. Take full responsibility for YOU, and let go of your responsibility for your spouse or the marriage. At the end of the day, the only person you control is yourself. And you can only do your part to help a marriage grow and thrive. You can't do the parts of both yourself and your spouse. When you take back power over yourself, you are taking on the role of a mature adult. Something wonderful happens when you learn that you have full responsibility for yourself along with the power to manage your own life by yourself, on your own. This is basic to adulthood. Remember that a healthy marriage requires two mature adults committed to mutual love and respect. You are only one half of the equation.

4. Take back your dignity as a daughter of God. Your voice counts. Your ideas count. Your experience counts. Your skills count. Accept yourself. Respect yourself. Why? Because God does. This inner strength will give you the motivation and power to stand alone against those who want to tear you down and grind you into dust under their boots. You don't have to believe their lies about you. Stand in the dignity that Jesus has robed you with as His redeemed one. Those who are aligned with your Heavenly Father will honor you as a sister. Those who aren't, won't. Their reviling lips say nothing of significance to you. You have the option to listen—or not.

5. Let go of your desire for things to be different. I know you had a dream of how you hoped your marriage would be, but you now have a reality, and the sooner you accept that reality, the sooner you'll be able to make adult decisions about that reality. We all have a great capacity for wishful thinking, but wishful thinking is a child-like behavior, and it prevents us from problem solving and creating strategies based on what's actually going on in our lives. Adults make hard decisions based on honest assessments of reality. It will be tempting to listen to the voices of other magical thinkers and dreamers in your life. Christians especially are prone to offering cliches and truisms rather than wise counsel rooted in an honest assessment of harsh realities. But remember that while some may want to help and may have good intentions, they were not given your life, they don't live in your world, and God hasn't given them direction or wisdom on your behalf. (Be prepared for them to claim otherwise, though!) When we are deeply involved in groups or organizations, we may childishly buy into what those around us say is right or true because it's the path of least resistance, and that's how we stay accepted in the group. While it is good to get wise counsel, not everyone has wise counsel to give. Foolish counsel rests on a foundation of propaganda with a desire to control. One of your opportunities moving forward will be discerning fantasy from reality, and this will often mean standing alone against the flow of shallow, but popular, Christian thought.

6. Lean on the strengths and endurance you've built up through years of being in a toxic marriage. Your survival experience in enduring and persevering through chronic emotional abuse has made you stronger than you could ever imagine. This experience will be the power behind your new growth as an adult woman. Adulting is messy, and you will make mistakes along the way. But it's okay to make mistakes! Ignore the temptation to accept and internalize the criticism of others as well as add to their negative voices by criticizing yourself when this happens. Try to resist this temptation by reminding yourself of who you are. You are a human being who has the right to learn and grow and make mistakes along the way. You are a dearly beloved daughter of the King, and He looks on you with the same love when you mess up as when you've got it all together. He is nothing like your abuser or your critics.

7. Learn to stand alone. This means detaching from toxic relationships and belief systems. As you set healthy boundaries, you may discover that many of your relationships were rooted in what you could give to the other person rather than being relationships of mutual love and respect. Some of those people will not want to be your friend anymore, and that will hurt; but you need to be willing to let them go. You won't be alone forever. You'll begin to attract other adults who can offer you mutual love and respect without taking advantage of you or using you. Once you break out of the suffocating bubble of someone else's poisonous lies, your head will clear, and you'll be able to learn and grow as the adult woman God made you to be.

When we embrace our new role as adult women, the balance in our family system and religious community will be disrupted, and the various players will react in different ways in an attempt to bring back the status quo. That's what we'll talk about next.

And that's the end of chapter eight. You guys have got the Kindle version of my book "Is It Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage" for only 99 cents. We're going to keep that sale going through Friday, December 3rd, so a couple more days here. If you know someone who needs this book, give them a link to the Amazon Kindle version and tell them it's only 99 cents. Give them a link to Episode 146 and 147 so they can listen to chapter eight and get a little taste of it. Also, if they sign up on my website [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com), they can get chapter one for free and chapter one of the companion workbook as well. Lots of free stuff and lots of help.

I want to add that we have small groups that go through this book. I have now hired someone who is coordinating these small groups. We are just finishing up our Fall Small Groups session. I don't know how many dozens and dozens — I can't remember the final count — of women who were involved in those. We're going to have Winter Small Groups coming up here and if you are on my mailing list, you will get an opportunity to find out about those and to register for those. If you're not already on my mailing list, you can get on there by going to my website [flyingfreenow.com](http://flyingfreenow.com) and hop on my mailing list. There are several different places on my website where you can enter your name and email address. Then you'll find out about those small groups when they start up again in the winter sometime. It's probably going to be in February. February, March, and April I'm guessing is when the next cohort goes through. Those are kind of nice. We do them online on Zoom. Originally I had planned on doing those small groups locally and have local groups all over the place, and I was going to train people, and then Covid hit. And because of Covid, we ended up doing it online, and it worked so slick online using Zoom that we just decided that's the way we're going to do it. Logistically, to try to train people locally is really almost impossible, anyway. This is how it seems God wanted it to work out. I think more women can actually go through it

together. You get to meet new people online. It's kind of fun that way as well.

So, that's all I have for you. Thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.