

THE ONE ABOUT GOD AND RELIGION AND HELL

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 163 of the Flying Free Podcast. Before I begin, I just want to thank you so much for doing this with me. We've been doing this for three years now and honestly, it's a dream come true. I just feel like I'm in my zone when I do this. I love it. I feel like I'm doing what I was made to do. And it's such a great feeling. I obviously couldn't do it without you guys.

I remember when I joined Twitter once years ago (I'm still on there but I hardly ever tweet) and I had no idea what Twitter was. And I was like, "Well, I think you're supposed to tweet." So I joined, I had no followers or anything, and I wrote on there, I wrote "Tweet." Because I wanted to see if anyone could hear me. And nobody responded, because of course, I had no followers. Again, I had no idea what I was doing. Total dork. So then I wrote again, "Tweet, tweet." And then I wrote, "Nobody's hearing me tweet, so what's the point of Twitter if no one can hear you tweet?" And then I quit Twitter for a few years and I finally joined again. I don't know, I think it was two years ago, and I figured it out.

That's like old lady stuff, right? That's why we do this together, because a podcast, obviously it has a podcaster person who's talking, and then it's got people who are listening. If there was nobody listening there would be no point to this. You guys make this fun for me. I love it. I imagine you guys sitting here in my office and us just having a conversation, and I love you guys. I get to see so many of you in my programs, I get to see you face-to-face every week, so I imagine your faces, many of you, and I just love you so much. I am so glad that we get to do this together, and I hope so much that it helps to set so many people free.

You guys, today I want to talk about God. Because I get a lot of questions, like the two that someone private-messaged me in the Flying Free Community Forum recently. I'm going to read these two questions to you and then I'm going to answer them as best I can, okay? The first question is, "If God truly loves us no matter what, no strings attached, no rules to follow, what do we ever have to repent of? If we keep sinning willfully, doesn't that mean we go to hell?" Okay, good question, right? Alright, here's the second question: "Do you believe that one has to believe in Christ to be saved (Romans 10:9) and if you don't you go to hell?"

I love these questions. I want to talk about them because how we answer these questions is going to determine how we live our lives and what kind of meaning we give to our lives. First of all, it's important to understand that the church that you know is just one of hundreds of thousands of churches in the world. And I'm just talking about Christian churches, the ones that believe in Jesus Christ. Ones that use the Bible as their reference point to understand Who God is and what His plan is for humankind and how we all fit into that plan.

I found this out: there are over forty-five thousand Christian denominations in the world today. Forty-five thousand. I had no idea. I knew it was a lot, but forty-five thousand? Seriously? And over two billion people in the world today (there's almost eight billion people on the planet), but over two billion of them are part of one of those forty-five thousand Christian denominations. So it makes me laugh every time I read someone's post on social media or a blog article or something and they say, "According to a very clear reading of scripture, such and such and such and such is the absolute truth." If the scripture is so stinkin' clear, then why do we have forty-five thousand Christian denominations?

I grew up in a evangelical free church, but my mom would tell you that she converted from being a Lutheran to being a true, born-again Christian. Lutherans and Catholics were all going to hell unless they prayed the prayer of salvation spoken in this way, by the way: "I'm sorry I'm a sinner, thank You for dying on the cross, please forgive my sins, and come into my heart. Amen." Those were the components of the prayer of salvation. And anyone who prayed that prayer would soon know that the Lutherans and the Catholics had it all wrong and they would turn away from being a Lutheran and a Catholic and then they would go to a real Christian church like the evangelical free kind that we went to.

Now here's the kicker: while we went to a evangelical free church, my mom was actually heavily influenced by her best friend and mentor whose husband was a pastor of a church that taught something different than the denomination that we were in. And that church taught Dispensationalism, which is a particular way of interpreting scripture that was not in alignment with what the EV Free church taught.

We did visit that dispensational church a few times, but my mom and dad preferred the EV Free church, so she tolerated those interpretational differences. However, she did indoctrinate her three daughters in the dispensational way of interpreting scripture, telling us that it was the only correct way and that our EV Free church did have it wrong. Now, even though it was a relatively new way of interpreting scripture, Dispensationalism was introduced in the 1800s by a man named John Nelson Darby

and it was brought mainstream by the Scofield Bible of the early 1900s. A revised version of it was perpetrated in the Ryrle Bible of the 1950s. But I do remember my mother telling me that the only proper Bible was the Scofield Bible, and that's why.

It's interesting, because many denominations, Christian denominations, consider Dispensationalism to be heretical. And likewise, the Dispensationalists consider other denominations and other Biblical interpretations to be heretical. Goodness gracious! Such a conundrum. Children, for the most part, will adopt the religious and political viewpoints of their parents until they grow up and discover that their parent's viewpoints are simply one of millions of different viewpoints. And then they will need to figure out what they themselves want to believe.

But a combination of things caused me to buy hook, line, and sinker everything that I was taught growing up well into my forties. First of all, I worshiped the ground my mother walked on. I really believed that the voice of God spoke through my mom. She told us she was a prophet and that this was so. And I loved her. I believed her. She had a very magnetic personality, she taught us with enthusiasm and conviction and passion, and I hung on every word. Now, sometimes I argued and asked questions, which she did not like. But I would go back and I'd think about it and I'd be like, "Yeah, my mom must be right."

Number two: My particular personality leaned towards pleasing those in authority to the point of fawning, okay? So that didn't help.

Number three: I was also a black and white thinker by nature, and this religious perspective suited the way my brain worked just fine. I liked things to be simple and clear. I liked knowing where all the lines were drawn so I could make the right choices and know that I was safe. When things started to get gray or iffy-iffy or wishy-washy, I wouldn't know what to choose and I would be lost and I would feel guilty because I might make a wrong turn and ruin my life and my ability to glorify God with it.

Number four: I really loved God with all my heart, and I wanted nothing more than to please Him. And this kind of theology gave me a feeling of security in knowing right from wrong.

Number five: My parents also took us to the Bill Gothard seminars every year when he came into town, and these were week-long seminars that indoctrinated us in ideas that put men in power and control over women. They perpetuated abuse by getting women and children to buy into the idea that they must always submit to their authority and that authority represented God in their life. If my parents had told me to jump in front

of a bus for the glory of God, I would have probably done it. Fortunately my family did not abuse their authority to that degree, but I know many families immersed in this did. And there are now entire online forums dedicated to helping these victims process and heal. You guys, I could go on and on and on but for the sake of time, let's just say that I believed this narrow view of the Bible and God and relationships, and I believed that it was the correct and the one true view, and that suited me for a long time.

I did go to a Christian college in Roseville, Minnesota, and there I discovered friends who went to other kinds of Christian churches in other Christian denominations and they believed different kinds of things from me. For example, most of my friends listened to rock music. And I had been taught that even Christian music, if it had a drum beat, such as the kind performed like Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, even that kind of music was satanic. And if you listened to it, you risked sliding down the slippery slope to apostasy and degeneration. So I watched my friends carefully to see signs of their spiritual demise. I never could find them.

I hate to say it, I compromised my values by secretly enjoying the radio when my friends had it on. But when I could choose the music I always made sure to choose Christian rock. And I would periodically confess to my mom that I had backslidden somewhat, but that I felt it might be okay. She disagreed, but I was a young adult by that time so what could she do?

I got married at age twenty-five and I proceeded to have nine kids and homeschool all of them. Actually, that's not true. The very last two I did not homeschool. The truly Christian thing to do, of course, was to have all these kids and homeschool them. We got caught up with the Vision Forum bandwagon and they were Dominionists, yet another denominational or theological belief. They believed that Christians would rule the world one day. How? By having as many babies as possible and taking over the government. And of course, America would be the world leader and Christian Americans would be the ones who would lead the way.

Now, I gotta tell ya. When I look back on this and how... I had a blog called "Visionary Womanhood." I had a local women's group promoting all of this crap. I shudder when I look back on this stuff. What gives me hope is remembering that God turned a Saul who was murdering Christians and He made a Paul, the first missionary. And I'll probably spend the rest of my life helping women discover the true character of God, that He is not an abusive God that we have to fear, but rather a God of pure love in which we can find rest and safety and freedom.

Alright, I give you that background so you can understand where I'm coming from when

I share with you what I believe today and how I landed on my current, active faith in God. Before I could change what I believed before, I had to see that I had options, that there actually wasn't one way to interpret the Bible and how that belief, the belief that there is only one way to interpret the Bible, that belief puts so much power and control in the hands of really wicked, abusive, manipulative, religious leaders. It puts power and control in the hands of cult leaders, basically, who brainwash so many people and continue to do that to this day. It is such a dangerous way of looking at the scriptures.

You could take any subject like "divorce and remarriage" or "female pastors" or "head coverings" or "the existence of hell" or "what kind of clothes Christians should wear" or "how exactly a person is saved for eternity," and there are hundreds of different ways to read verses that refer to these things and interpret what they're saying.

And of course everyone thinks that their way is the right way. Their way is the clear and obvious way, and anyone who doesn't believe what they believe is obviously stupid and very likely going to hell. So what do we do? I mean, how do we figure out what we want to believe? I can only tell you my perspective. But remember, it's just one in a billion, so you'll have to do your own thinking on this and figure it out for yourself. But I'm happy to share where I've landed, and I'll share it by answering these two questions that this Flying Free member asked in our forum.

So let's go back to them. Let's first of all talk about the first question: "If God truly loves us no matter what, no strings attached, no rules to follow, what do you ever have to repent of? If we keep sinning willfully, does that mean we go to hell?" So to answer this question, let's talk about the story of the prodigal son. This is a story that Jesus told. And He told it for a reason, and I think it's to answer a question like this.

So this son takes his inheritance early. He leaves his family, his dad, and he goes out to live a life of pleasure and debauchery. He's sinning willfully. Now, what does the story tell us? Does Jesus say, "This guy has to repent to win back his father's love"? Nope. Jesus tells us that this dad was watching and waiting the entire time the son was living in debauchery. His father was always present, always there, always loving, always anticipating the inevitable reunion. That is the God I worship. Do you see this? Jesus was trying to tell us about the character of God. I'm sorry, but I like it. I want to worship that God.

Now, the story that most Christians tell about God is a story of an immature toddler man, pouting in His castle in the sky because His son isn't glorifying Him. And so He tells His minions to throw His son into a pit of fire for leaving unless the son comes crawling back, begging for forgiveness. Ew. Which God do you want to worship? Which

God has all the power? All the wisdom? All the love? The one dangling His son over the flames waiting to get His revenge, or the One smiling at the front door, waiting with anticipation for the awesome reunion He knows is coming?

Do you guys remember the older son in this story? He was mad at dad. Dumb dad let's his little brother go, and then he has a big party for him when he comes back home? Big brother wants a dad who will throw little brother into hell. And sadly, a lot of Christians are kind of like big brother in this story. They don't really want a God who forgives and restores without some sort of groveling and payback. Big brother Christians are miserable.

I was a big brother Christian for the longest time. I still am actually wired that way, you guys. I still have to fight that inside of me. It's a fearful, miserable, unhappy way to live life. And I don't want to live a fear-filled life. It didn't bear very good fruit. And God says that love casts out fear. So to the degree that I am living in fear, that is the degree that I am not living in love, either in accepting God's love for me or in loving myself and others.

But the key is in my conscience choice to believe in a God Who is 100% pure love, just like the father that Jesus Himself describes in His parable about the prodigal son. There was a reason that Jesus told that parable and all of the others: for those who have ears to hear it.

So let's go to the second question, which is, "Do you believe that one has to believe in Christ to be saved (Romans 10:9) and if you don't you go to hell?" I do believe those who believe in Christ will be saved. I also believe this in Romans 14:11: "For it is written, 'As I live,' said the Lord, 'every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall confess to God.'" You see, the God that I believe in and worship is powerful. He's really big. Really, really big. He's powerful enough to reveal Himself to and save all of His creation if He chooses to do that. To redeem everyone from the enemy so the enemy gets nothing. Loser! The enemy loses in the end, right?

Now, under the beliefs that I was taught as a child, the enemy gets most of the goods. I mean, God, He's great, but you know what? He only gets a handful of people. And those people have to say this prayer, but the vast majority of people in all of history, including all of those who have never heard, they're all just going to burn in hell forever and ever. Gross. I mean to me, that's not a God Who wins. God's the loser in that story.

I was taught as a child that my Catholic relatives were going to burn in hell unless they said this prayer of salvation the correct way and abandoned their practice of praying to

Mary and the saints. We sent missionaries overseas to rescue the handful who would obey our specific interpretations of scripture and all the rest, unfortunately, our Heavenly Father full of saving love would burn alive forever and ever.

I'm sorry, but the cognitive dissonance of this religion is tremendous. No wonder young people are leaving Christianity by the droves. It is an illogical, gaslighting, confusing, abusive religion. And I don't think that Jesus came to set it up. He didn't come to set up another religion. He made it clear, I think, that He came to do away with religion. He came to introduce relationship with the Creator of the universe.

Do you know... I don't think a lot of people know this, but early Christians didn't even believe in hell. They didn't interpret scripture to mean that God was going to burn people alive for all eternity. That idea came later on. And just like there are books written by theologians who believe in hell, so there are just as many books written by theologians who don't. And the bottom line is we won't really know for sure until we're done with this life, because right now we are stuck in time and space on this planet. But guess what? God is not. And He has a lot more understanding of all of these things than we do. Can we be okay with that? I mean, isn't that where faith comes into play, trusting in God when we don't know all the details?

I think because God lives outside of time and space and He's a little bit bigger than we are, we need to think bigger than time and space. I don't have all the answers, okay? I just know that many so-called "Christian traditions" have been twisted and turned to resemble more of the devil than God. And when I began to question the teachings that didn't line up with Who Jesus demonstrated God to be, for example, the story of the prodigal son, as well as just Who Jesus was on this planet, I ended up changing some of the abusive beliefs that I had.

And those changes, honestly, they've helped me love God, myself, and others so much more deeply. And because I love the results of my new beliefs about God, I've consciously and intentionally chosen to keep them. I like the fact that there is so much mystery about the universe. My far more simple beliefs and more child-like trust is bearing really good fruit in my life and in the lives of the people around me, and I believe it's because they are simple and faith-filled instead of complex, confusing, controlling, and full of fear.

My simple faith in a loving and a powerful God inspires me to love and accept human beings right where they are. I no longer need for them to approve of me and I also no longer place value on them based on their adherence to rules and regulations that I impose on them. I also don't live in fear that if I don't say it the right way or if I don't do

the right things or manipulate them in the right way so that they say the right prayer that they're going to burn in hell forever and ever and ever. I don't have to be afraid of that. I used to be afraid of that.

You guys, I was one of those kids... I literally would go around... There was this one day (I've told this story before) in the third grade where I gathered up my third grade class and I said, "Meet me outside after school. We will pray the prayer of salvation and then you can go to heaven." Problem solved. There was a crowd out there afterwards. I prayed the prayer and those guys got saved. The lady who was carpooling me, she was madder than a wet hen because I held up the whole carpool, but I didn't care. Those people got saved.

I went around and told everyone, "You're going to hell. Pray this prayer and you'll be saved." And that's kind of the approach that I took to all of my missionary endeavors, even as I got older. Obviously I toned it down a little bit, but I was very, very scared for people and very, very scared of what was going to happen to them. I was afraid for my relatives. I was afraid for my grandmas and grandpas and my aunts and uncles and my cousins and all of my friends and my neighbors. When I graduated from high school from a class of almost eight hundred people, I was voted "Most Likely To Become a Nun." Now, they didn't understand that I was not a Catholic and, "I would never be a nun, goodness gracious!" But they thought of me as a religious fanatic, okay? And that's how they viewed me, because of how I went around.

That's who I was, and I've changed. I've exchanged judgment and fear for love and acceptance. I've exchanged burden for freedom. I've exchanged religion for relationship. I've exchanged confusing and controlling for a simple faith. I've exchanged shame for acceptance of myself exactly as I am. My relationships with myself and with God and with my family and friends have all improved drastically, as you can imagine. I've let go of trying to please others or trying to make them be the way I think they should be. And I now hold space for them to be who they are, even if that means... There are some people who no longer want to be near me because I'm not doing exactly what they think I should do, I'm not believing what they think I should believe.

Now, I'm not a theologian. I don't have a seminary degree. I've gone through a huge deconstruction process over the course of the last several years. After experiencing and watching copious amounts of spiritual, sexual, emotional, financial, and physical abuse in Christian churches, they just are not echoing the life of Jesus. So why do I want to buy into their ideas and philosophies that bear such destructive fruit? I don't want to do it anymore.

So here's my simple faith in a nutshell: I believe the Creator of the universe is a God of love and power. He loves infinitely and His power is infinite and beyond our comprehension. Those two things. And I am content to dwell in that understanding and entrust Him with my life and afterlife and the lives and afterlives of all I love, including, guess what? Including my pets, Rambo, Thor, Simba, Link, and Norman. Because why not? If I love them and my love is human, just think of what divine love is from the One who created Rambo, Thor, Simba, Link, and Norman. If God cares about a sparrow, then I think He cares about my pets.

So you know what? I'm just going to fling myself and my loved ones on the mercy and within the power of this God, and I am safe. We are saved! Not because I did it all right, but because He always does everything creatively, miraculously, and for all eternity, and I am Him and He is mine, period.

Now, if you want to find out more about how I came to have a faith that can't be taken away from me in spite of abuse and suffering in my life and in the world, you can check out Episodes 105 and 107 of this podcast. We go into the whole idea of abuse, you know, "What about people who are abusive, what about Hitler for crying out loud?" but I'm not going to do that here.

Anyway, remember that Jesus was considered a heretic of His time. He really was. He was called the son of the devil. Paul was considered a heretic. Most of the disciples were murdered for their simple faith and rejection of their previous religious beliefs. So if you find yourself getting away from religion, don't be surprised if you experience the same condemnation. Just know that you are in amazing company. And that is all I have for you. Until next time, fly free.