

IS IT YOUR CHRISTIAN DUTY TO SURRENDER TO EMOTIONAL ABUSE IN YOUR MARRIAGE?

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

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 17 of the Flying Free Podcast. Rachel and I are here today, and we're going to actually talk about something that someone sent in. Someone sent in a question. She was interested in having us talk about this issue and Rachel and I, when we read it about it, were just jumping all over, because it's something that we've definitely thought a lot about in our own lives, and we are going to enjoy talking about this with you. I think that you will all be able to relate to this person's topic that they wanted to bring us. I'm going to read what she wrote, and then Rachel and I are going to dive in.

Okay, she said, "Can you talk about how we are to surrender to God? For years and years that's what I thought I was doing and that I didn't have to fight for something better in my situation, which I did a lot in calling out my husband's abusive behavior whenever it occurred because I didn't want to fall into the trap of being a doormat. But it was exhausting, because my standing up for what's right didn't make him change. In fact, I think just because it was me, a mere woman calling him out, riled him up so that he probably did it more. I thought if I could just point out how he was not behaving in a Christ-like or loving way it would help him to see, but it never has, and he resents me for having such disrespect.

Then I went through times where I tried to say and do very little, even when he continued to behave badly. I and other Christian friends said I should leave it all to God and He would step in and deal with me. I think as Christians, He will ultimately deal with all of this when we get to Heaven, but not necessarily here on earth. So while we continue to trust God and live for Him, He may very well not just step in. It's strange how over the years I've seen God step in miraculously in very dramatic ways, but then there are other times when you're convinced He will, but He doesn't. We also have to accept His sovereignty and that all will be revealed to us at a later time, and I'm sure His reasons will be very beautiful.

So I think as a Christian woman in an abusive relationship, it would be helpful to explore this idea of submitting everything to God. Maybe this just means accepting a situation in grace and accepting that God won't just appear before your abusive husband and make him change due to the element of free will. But then we as

Christians want to do what's right before God. Perhaps it's having right attitudes and trusting God in other ways that He can help us with courage and peace and enable us to step out into the unknown precipice of a new life without our abuser. All the time now I am learning that I don't have to bend to my husband's will and I can simply say 'no,' and he can't make me do what I don't want to. I don't know why it took me so long to realize" (that sounds so rebellious, you know, coming from our background, doesn't it?) "that I have free will and can choose."

Please let me just interject something here for those of you who are listening. If you've been listening for a long time, you understand where we're coming from, but if you're new, you might think, "Oh my goodness, who are these people?" and I just want you to know that we're not talking about healthy marriages here, okay? We're not talking about two people who are giving and taking. We're talking about dysfunctional, destructive marriages, and we're talking to women of faith who have been in destructive relationships with men who have forced their will and have taken power and control over these women for many, many years, either emotionally, physically, financially, or in other ways. So when this person comes across like they're saying, "I can choose — I don't have to bend to my husband's will," that sounds so rebellious, but we're talking about someone who's finally learning to grow up and be an adult and stand up and say, "No, you can't do this. I have boundaries, and you need to respect my boundaries just like I need to respect your boundaries. It goes both ways." All right. Let me go back to this question:

"Maybe it's because I spent so much time trying to please him so he would show me love. However, I realize that no matter how perfect I was as a wife, it made no difference to how he treated me. It wasn't about my behavior — it was about his, and keeping me down and in my so-called "serve me" place so he could feel superior. When, due to so many years of coercive abuse, I started to withdraw emotionally to protect myself, I realized, also, I cared less what he thought, and I started to regain my control over my life and emotions. So my point is, it may be helpful to explore what submitting to God means in practice, but also, I think we could find helpful examples in the Bible where women took action in the face of tyranny and didn't just remain passively thinking they were submitting to His will. It's this kind of example which I need to hear over and over again that gives me the courage to dare to image a new, better life free from daily nonsense."

Okay, that was an earful, but I think she explained really well the dilemma. So Rachel, I'm going to let you give some of your thoughts.

RACHEL: Right. I love that she's wrestling with all these different thoughts. You can tell

she's someone who's waking up to the reality that she's lived in all this time where she thought it was one thing, but now she realizes it's something completely different. With all of the ramifications that brings along with it, it's huge. It takes a long time, it's exhausting, but it's so worthwhile when you're in a relationship that is sort of destructive, as I'm sure hers was.

So the idea of surrender — I think it's a term we toss around in Christian circles quite a bit without really thinking about what that might look like in an everyday situation. I know for me, it sort of prompted me to want to just be a doormat, and of course there's plenty of opportunity for that in my life — my husband liked me like that. So I would just think that I needed to do whatever everyone else said, and that was me working out God's will for me. If everyone else was telling me what to do, then I was surrendered and I was being a Christ-follower, etc.

It wasn't until I finally was forced to wake up, like I think this woman was, that I realized that was something completely different. This motion of surrender was actually a very active process in my life. It required me to step up and to be the steward of my life as God had called me to be, and then to stop trying to control my husband into having a good marriage with me that makes sense. But to do what I needed to do as a woman of faith, a woman of God, I needed to follow Him and put boundaries with my husband and let God deal with what came from that and see where the chips fell, if you will. Does that make sense, Natalie?

NATALIE: Yeah. I think you have to think too about who you actually are surrendering to, because I think a lot of us thought that we were surrendering to God, but we were really surrendering to people and what they wanted us to do.

RACHEL: For me that was the same thing. I had such a low view of myself as compared to other people. I had put everyone else in the position of God. I've said that before. I had put everyone else in the position of God, and so if they said something to me, they were obviously speaking for God. If they had some sort of direction or something that they wanted me to do, they were speaking for God. And it wasn't until I started to put everything in its right place and let God be God and people be people and allow myself to step into the role of being a human being, not something lesser than or an entity that was required to be in constant subjugation to other people and other forces, that everything fell into place.

I'm allowed to follow the direction that God has laid out for me and be loving and respectful and kind and live out God's truth in this world and allow other people to make their own decisions. And they may make a choice to do the same, to love and

follow Jesus and to love and respect others, or they may not. In my case, my ex-husband didn't want to have a relationship with me with this new dynamic where I was not going to let him take the place of God in my life any longer.

NATALIE: Can you give one or two examples of when you actually decided, "You know, in this, I'm going to actually move in this direction or make this choice, because I really believe God wants me to make this choice," and then it made your husband upset or it made someone in your church upset and they believed that you were actually rebelling against God rather than doing what you believed you were actually obeying God?

RACHEL: Oh, absolutely. So there was a defining moment where I was reading Leslie Vernick's "The Emotionally Destructive Marriage," and there was a page that I just came to, and I was sitting on my back porch and I was just overcome. She said something about, "Will you surrender the outcome of your marriage to God?" And I ran inside the house and I fell down in the laundry room and was just crying my eyes out and saying, "Yes, I will Lord, I will," and I knew what that meant. I knew that taking this stand that I had been so scared to take for thirteen years, I knew that it could lead to the end, and I had been so scared of that possibility, and I had done everything I could to prevent it. It was something I never, ever wanted, but I was to the point where I realized I could not avoid that possibility any longer but that something had to change.

I remember I got up off the floor and the blood vessels in my eyes and around my eyes had burst because the force of what was going on inside of me came out. Then I remember my husband coming home and he was very suspicious and sort of chucking at me like, "Such a silly woman. You must have allergies or something like that." I was always the butt of his jokes. So that started this whole long process where people would just say, "What has gotten into Rachel? She's always been this nice, faithful, loving wife," and everyone else thought I was the one holding the family together, and now that I was no longer doing that, there was obviously something wrong with me.

There were plenty of people who looked at the fact that I had gotten to the point where I knew that it wasn't a good plan for me to go to marriage counseling with him. That's a shocking idea that you wouldn't go to marriage counseling to people who honestly don't know very much about abuse/power dynamics or anything. They think that marriage counseling is the end-all-be-all, and if you don't agree with them, you are obviously rebelling or something like that, or you don't want your marriage to work. Some people that I encountered were not able or willing to do the research and understand. They were so stuck in this way of thinking about things — that they already knew everything — so they didn't really need to consider the things that I was learning and was willing to share with them.

I think, Natalie, that you said that you, in the past, wish that you would've not tried to explain to people. But I think that we all go through this point where we are so excited and our eyes are so open from the information we're learning about that we want to share it with everyone, because we think they'll see, because it's so obvious to us now. But they don't, because they haven't been living in your life. They don't know those encounters with your husband, and they probably can't even begin to imagine what they do to you. People wrote me letters where they told me that God had told them to say these things to me about what I was doing and rebuking me and how they were being a friend, because friends... I can't remember the verse in Psalms, what is it? "Grateful are the wounds of a friend"?

NATALIE: Oh yeah: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend." Then "the kisses of an enemy" or something?

RACHEL: Exactly. Yes. So I was being kissed by the enemy, and they were being faithful by breaking my bones.

NATALIE: Right. Oh, the love of Jesus in the lives of these people. Amazing.

RACHEL: Yes.

NATALIE: Here's the thing about that too. In the private Facebook groups that we're part of, everyone gets those letters. So if you're accidentally listening in to this podcast and you're thinking about sending a letter like that, just so you know, that's not really very original. And it's also completely not helpful. It's like, "Let's think of a way to kick someone while they're down. Let's just kick them in the back while they're bleeding all over on the ground."

RACHEL: Yep.

NATALIE: It's completely unhelpful.

RACHEL: I would make a bet that in every single situation when a person feels like they have to send that sort of communication, there has been a failure to listen. They may have heard a few things and then they made up their mind and then they started spouting off. There has been a failure to listen.

NATALIE: You're right. They've taken in what you've said through a specific lens, but they really didn't get what you were saying at all because they were too blinded by their own...

RACHEL: Pride?

NATALIE: Yeah! The religious propaganda that they are immersed in...

RACHEL: ...and I think fear, because you've been taught these things, and anything outside of the norms — like, for example, "Everyone should go to marriage counseling" — it's scary if you start stepping outside that way, because "That's what you do. This is a simple formula for when there are marriage problems, and if you step outside of that, you're obviously wrong in some way."

NATALIE: Right. Well, I remember when I was getting "help" from my church — and I put "help" in quotation marks because it wasn't ultimately very helpful at all — but I was getting help from them, and I remember when I felt a clear leading from God that I needed to be done with that because it wasn't going anywhere. I was just hitting my head against a wall. The Holy Spirit was just like, "Natalie, why do you have to have these people helping you? I want to help you. Will you look to Me? I want to be your God. These people are your god. These people are big in your life. You're scared of them, you're afraid of what they're going to do to you if you don't do what they want you to do. I am not a God who inspires fear and burden and trepidation in my children. Turn to me. I love you. I want to take care of you. Let me lead and guide you." And I was really scared to do that because I had been raised my whole life to believe that whoever was in authority in my life was the voice of God in my life.

RACHEL: Exactly.

NATALIE: I was even taught that you should kind of guess what they want and even if they don't ask you for what they want you to do, do what you believe they want you to do. Fulfill their wishes, because you are in turn fulfilling the wishes of God. That is complete and total bunk. Anyway, when you're coming out of that, it's very hard to tear yourself away from that kind of thinking, and it's really a security blanket. It's so much easier to look to a person and have that person say, "Okay little Johnny, do A, B, and C." "Okay, I will." That's like child-like behavior. I was behaving like a child. But it's much more difficult and requires an intimate faith in Jesus Christ to step away from human beings and to walk with Him alone and to do what He's calling you to do no matter what the fallout is with other people. And when you're getting out of abuse, the fallout is tremendous. Like you were saying, even if you just don't go to marriage counseling, it's like, "Well, are you even a Christian?"

RACHEL: Right! You know what that reminds me of, Natalie, in Acts where the new church is grappling with leaving behind the old law and the prophets and leaving

behind all of the extra laws that had been written in addition to the Torah. It was scary for them. Some of the Pharisees were wanting to impose circumcision on the Gentiles, people who never followed those types of laws, even, and they were coming to faith and the Pharisees wanted to tell them that they had to be circumcised in order to belong to the faith. Thank goodness James, the brother of Jesus, stepped up and said, "Let's not make it any harder for people to follow God." But the thing is, it was sort of a security blanket, because they allowed them to have a concrete marker that they were on the right side of God — a visible sign. I think "walking in the Spirit," as Paul refers to it, is scarier. It's harder. It requires more devotion. It requires your heart. It doesn't just require fulfilling rituals. It's everything.

NATALIE: Right. And there's a faith aspect to it as well when you are looking at other people and seeing how they're walking with God. In our experience, especially getting out, we've seen a lot of controlling, abusive behavior on the part of Christians who believe that it is their duty to cross over into the boundaries of other people and to be the Holy Spirit in other people's lives. Even us as women, we tried to do that with our abusers.

RACHEL: Yeah, absolutely.

NATALIE: We tried to tell them what they should do and we tried to make them do it — "You've got to get better" — instead of just letting them make their own choices and realizing we're not responsible for their behavior. We don't have to take on the guilt of what they're doing, even if they try to shame us and put it on us, which they always do. We don't have to take that and we don't have to try to change them. In fact, we can't change other people. Only God can do that, but we can change ourselves, and we do need to make choices for ourselves.

So in our situation, both you and I, Rachel, we eventually came to the point where we said, "Okay, husband. You get to choose for yourself and you have. You've made your choice clear, and so now I choose, because you're choosing to behave in destructive ways towards me, to get away from you permanently and to legally protect myself from you via divorce." And that's perfectly acceptable. We can talk about divorce in another episode — we're not going to go into that here — but that's a perfectly acceptable thing to make your own adult choice if someone else refuses to come around and meet you halfway and treat you with respect (and certainly your spouse, of all people). Then you get to choose to leave.

Let's go back a little bit. One of the things she said is that she was wondering if there was anybody in the Bible who took initiative. So her dilemma is, "Well, do I sit and wait

for God to make these changes in the life of my husband, or should I take initiative? And then are there any examples in the Bible of women who took initiative instead of just waiting for God going, 'Oh Lord, please save our family from...'" Like, for example, let's take Abigail's story. David was going to come and kill their whole household because Nabal, her foolish husband (we talked about this in another podcast), had offended David. So what if Abigail just said, "Okay, all of my friends, let's get together and let's just pray and hope for the best." Well, they'd all have been dead. Or what if Jael, when that one guy that she killed... She took a stake and drove it through his head... I can't even remember what his name was. I should have looked up the story.

RACHEL: No, I want to say Gideon, but it's not Gideon.

NATALIE: No, but anyway, Jael was a woman who, when this general came into her tent, she pretended like she was his friend and then when he fell asleep, she drove a tent peg through his head. What if she didn't do that? What if she just sat there wringing her hands going, "Oh Lord, what should I do? What should I do? I'm just gonna trust that you're going to take his life." By the way, this is not an endorsement for murdering people. This was a war. They were in a war, okay? Or what if Ruth had never laid down at the feet of Boaz? Talk about awkward. She had to actually go and do that, and then, you know, she ended up getting married to him. But she had to take initiative.

RACHEL: Yes. Well, I think what these stories show is that acting in an attitude of surrender is a very active process. It's not something that's passive and just being a doormat. It is taking action and letting God work through you and also letting God have the results. So not being attached to a certain kind of outcome, but being faithful in the moments and doing what needs to be done as the Spirit leads. That is surrender.

NATALIE: Right, well, and think about all the things that a woman getting out of an abusive relationship has to give up and surrender to God.

RACHEL: Oh yeah.

NATALIE: She has to surrender her reputation, she has to surrender her children, she has to surrender her career or her life or her financial status, her home. She has to surrender everything. She has been laid low. She has to surrender her friendships. So she's taking initiative to do what I believe is right in standing up and saying "no" to abuse, and she has to surrender all of these things to God. It takes a tremendous amount of faith for women to do that.

I don't want to knock people who decide to stay in their destructive relationship. I think

that takes a tremendous amount of faith as well, and if you are someone who believes strongly that the Holy Spirit is leading you to stay, then stay. I almost touched on it, and then we skittered away from it a few minutes ago, but this is where we need to trust that God is working in our fellow Christians' lives, our brothers and sisters' lives, just as much as He's working in our life, and we don't know and we are being arrogant to think that we can presume to know what God is leading one person to do compared to what God is leading you to do. Just because God leads me to get out does not mean that He is going to lead every woman to get out. And just because God is leading some women to stay... There were some women I knew personally who were staying, who still are staying, and one woman I'm thinking of in particular never, ever discouraged me from making the choice to leave. She supported me either way. That is the epitome of Christianity, I believe.

RACHEL: Absolutely.

NATALIE: She trusted that the Holy Spirit was strong enough to lead in my life, and she also trusted that the Holy Spirit was strong enough to lead in her life, and that we are not cookie cutter people. God has different jobs for different people and different circumstances, and that is why it is so important that we're listening to Him and not to other people.

RACHEL: Yes. Trusting in Him and allowing Him to be enough and bringing Him to the very core of who you are and allowing that to push out the things that had been crowding that space, if that makes sense. You know, the things you'd mentioned earlier: the life that you had built and the reputation you had and all of that. Just allowing Him to take over that space and be enough there.

NATALIE: Right. And one last thing too that I want to make sure we touch on is that no matter what you decide, stay, leave (this could apply to any large decision you have to make in your life) — sometimes we think as Christians that if we made the right choice, then all of these great things are going to happen afterwards.

RACHEL: There's going to be no pain.

NATALIE: Right, exactly. It's like when you're a little kid and you do the right thing and then you get a piece of candy. Well no, we're not kids anymore, and that's not how it works. When you make the right choice, often things get much, much worse. But think about it — Jesus went to the cross. Christianity spread, but they went through a lot of persecution, especially initially. The church has been through all kinds of stuff. As long as we live in a fallen world, things are never ever going to be a bed of roses for any of

us, no matter what choice we make.

The whole point is not the end destination — it's not the piece of candy at the end of the road, or the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow — it's the journey. It's the faith journey. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow is when we go into eternity and we are finally face to face with our Savior, Jesus Christ. That's the pot of gold. Until we get there, there is no pot of gold. It's just a journey of walking with Him and trusting Him and going deeper and deeper and deeper into relationship with Him.

And that's going to mean entering into His sufferings, okay? It's going to mean entering into being ridiculed and rejected and told you're the son of the devil and the whole nine yards. And yet, as you do that, your light and your love will begin to shine and pour out through you into the world around you, because it can't help but do that. When you are listening to the Holy Spirit and allowing Him to live through you, He is going to touch the people around you, and when you see that, that's just going to be an extra blessing in your life. So you can see there is so much good that comes out of this, but it's a walk of faith, and it's very exciting, and it's also very painful, and it's also very profound. And that's the journey that we're on as Christians, so that's our quest.

RACHEL: Yeah. I wouldn't trade it. It's so worthwhile to walk minute by minute with God and allow yourself to surrender to being His vessel here on earth and allowing His love to seep through and trusting that He is good even in the pain, and He knows your pain. He saw everything, and He's with you.

NATALIE: That's right. Amen. All right. That's all we have for today. If you enjoy listening to the Flying Free podcast, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. Is that what it's called? Or iTunes? Let's see — I think that's it. We're done. Thank you so much for joining us, and we'll see you next week! Or we'll hear you next... How would I say that? We'll connect next week. All right. Fly free.