

HELP! MY CHURCH IS GOING TO KICK ME OUT UNLESS I SUBMIT TO THEIR AUTHORITY AND GO BACK TO MY ABUSER!

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 217 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have a couple of listener questions, but before we dig into those, I want you to know that this month, April 2023, inside of the Flying Free program, I am teaching a course all about healing our relationship with God, because so many of the women I work with, when they tell me their stories, there's always this element of spiritual abuse where the concept of God or the nature of God is twisted in order to control them.

So for example, many Christian women are taught that if they speak up about the abuse going on in their home that they are being unforgiving or rebellious or unsubmitive or disobeying the Bible, and that God is displeased with them. So the people who made up these ideas in order to serve their own agenda are now using these ideas about an abusive god, small "g," to strike fear in the hearts of women and motivate them to step down and step back into their place where they are more easily controlled by men who want to be in power. Women actually go along with these ideas when they get approval and strokes from these men in power over them.

Now, when women finally discover the truth about how abusive these ideas are, they're often left wondering if everything they ever learned about God is true or just a lie. And I know women who have completely walked away from the faith because of this. But I also know women, and I would put myself in this category, who have deconstructed an abusive faith and then rebuilt their faith on a foundation of an amazing Love — Love with a capital "L," because that Love is God with a capital "G." He is the essence of Love. Love. This is a God we do not have to fear, but a God we are safe with. A God who creates wide open and safe spaces for us to live and move in, just like a good parent would for his or her children.

Now, we find these spaces not in our chaotic world, although men and women who are living in the truth of this God do create beautiful pockets of love and safety in the midst of this chaos. But the safe spaces are created within ourselves, God with us, Emmanuel. Not outside of us — within us. This is what Jesus left us: His Spirit within us.

So anyway, if you're someone who's struggling with your faith after being spiritually whipped around by men and women in power, I'd love to invite you to join me inside

the program during the month of April. Every Saturday we're going to be meeting live together to talk about these things. And if you're listening to this particular episode after April 2023, it's not a problem. When you join Flying Free, you will have access to all of those sessions and all the rest of our core curriculum that's going to change your life and help you heal deeply from the inside out. You can learn more and apply at joinflyingfree.com. All right, let's listen to our first question.

LISTENER: Hi, Natalie. I just want to thank you for the tremendous help that I've received so far from listening to your podcast. And I recently joined the Sisterhood membership, and I have just learned more in the last couple of months that I've been listening than I've learned in my entire life about myself and about what abuse looks like, what it feels like, how to recognize it, and I'm beginning to become self-aware and I'm beginning to heal. I'm starting my journaling today.

But my question is I'm just often plagued by, like other women that I've heard on this program before, we always are holding out that hope that our husband might change, right? When we're just about to give up and go ahead and move forward with the divorce, throw in the towel, we have that little, tiny voice saying, "What if? What if?" And I mentally know it's not healthy, but I have one, I think, one last fear. That scripture that says if a believing wife is married and her unbelieving husband wants to stay in the marriage, I guess if she wants to leave but he wants to stay, that she should stay and that her good behavior and her great example will cause him to be converted. So I have just agreed with almost 99.9% of everything I've learned from your podcast, so I'm very anxious to hear what you have to say about this question. Thank you.

NATALIE: Okay, first of all, I was just going to dive into what I had written up about this because I definitely want to address her questions, but I just got to thinking: I also want to say something about not agreeing with everything that someone puts out there into the world. That's actually very, very normal. It actually is unhealthy if we start listening to a podcast or read a book or maybe take a class from someone and we agree with everything they say. I really think that this is kind of a mentality that we come out of, out of these religious circles that a lot of us were running in. At least this was my take, and maybe it's just my own dysfunction, but I always used to think, oh my word, if I found someone who I agreed with, I wanted to believe everything they said. I just thought, "Well, if I agree with almost everything, then surely everything they say is good," and jump in, hook, line and sinker, right?

So now I've grown a little bit in that area, and now what I do is when I hear a teacher or I read a book, I'm okay with and I feel very comfortable with going, "Oh, I agree with them on this, and I actually don't agree with them on that." And I still feel comfortable

continuing to read more of their books if I really enjoy them or listen to more of their podcasts. I actually listen to several podcasts and I don't agree with a lot of the things that are in these podcasts, but they are edifying to me and they're helpful to me in other ways, and a lot of what they say does resonate with me, but I decide now — I've gotten more comfortable in my own skin where I decide what resonates with me and where God has me at and what doesn't.

And you've heard the old saying, "You chew the meat and you spit out the bones." So I certainly hope that everyone who listens to this podcast will do the same thing, because I promise you, I can just tell you from firsthand experience that I am not right about everything, and I will probably change my mind about a lot of things and maybe even be teaching completely different things ten years down the road — who knows, right? So I'll give you my thoughts about this question and what I'm thinking about it today, okay? And then you can just take it for what it's worth.

All right, so the verses I think that she's referring to — there's actually two different sets of verses — but the first one that I want to talk about is 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. And it says this: "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)..." Just notice that, first of all. Paul is saying, "To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord)..." He's saying, "This isn't God saying this. This is me giving you my opinion," okay? "If a brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his believing wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him go. The believing brother or sister is not bound in such cases. God has called you to live in peace. How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?"

So these verses are not talking about a wife who is being — or a husband for that matter — who is being abused and mistreated by her husband. Paul is actually addressing some brand new Christians who are wondering, "Hey, is it okay to be married to someone who chooses not to be a Christian?" Remember the whole unequally yoked thing? That actually comes in a later chapter. "And if it's not okay to be married to someone who doesn't want to be a Christian, then should you divorce? Let's say you're already married." Because these are brand new Christians, right? A lot of them were already married when they became a Christian, and then they look over and they realize, "Oh, my partner or my husband or wife doesn't want to be a Christian. I do, but he or she doesn't. So now should we divorce them because they're not a believer?"

And Paul is saying here, “No. That's not really very loving. Seriously? That's living according to the letter of the law and not the spirit of the law, which is love. The spirit of the law is always love. Love fulfills all of the laws and the prophets. Love does. It always boils down to love.” So Paul also says, “The sanctification of the one covers the other in this case. Now, if the unbeliever, the partner who doesn't want to be a Christian, wants to leave because your new faith is freaking him out, then let him go. Don't try to make him stay, because again, that is love. We do not control others.” I know this is hard for us modern day Christians to believe, because we're all a bunch of control freaks, right? “Everyone gets to choose for themselves. But if they don't care that you're now a Christian and they want to stay, then why would you end that relationship? Plus, you never know. Maybe they'll become a believer one day, and wouldn't that be terrific?”

So again, there is nothing in this passage about the unbelievers abusing their believing partners. It's simply a matter of people who choose to believe in Jesus, which was this new religion that they started, and those who do not. Abuse is not on the table here at all.

But now maybe this listener, I got to thinking, maybe she was also referring to this other verse in 1 Peter 3:1-2 which says, “Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word...” That means someone who's not a Christian. They don't believe that Jesus was a Son of God. This whole new Christianity thing — not interested. “...that they may be won over without words...” You don't even have to try to argue with them or convince them, “Yes, Jesus is God.” You can just have good behavior — by the behavior of their wives. “...when they see the purity and reverence of your lives.”

Okay. Do you see anything in here about abuse? No. These verses are not talking about Christian wives submitting to abuse or to abusive husbands. It's referring to submitting to a husband who does not subscribe to this new religion of Christianity. Now, there are other verses in the Bible that talk about submitting to one another in love: Ephesians 5:21, 1 Peter 5:5, and of course, there are dozens of “one another” verses that apply to all relationships, including marriage relationships, because we are “one another's” in our marriage too, right? But in that culture — you've got to remember when the Bible was written or when this part of the Bible was written — there were slaves, it was also very patriarchal, there was blatant misogyny. So the letters to the churches are going to allude to some of these cultural beliefs from back then which still have hung on even today, sadly enough. But they are much less, right?

So the new Christians are wondering, “Hey, wait a minute. Should a Christian wife still submit to...” She would submit to her husband as a given, right? Back then it was,

because that was just a given. The Christians aren't wondering if she should submit. They're wondering if she should submit to him if he's not a Christian. And the answer was, "Why not?" We can't expect someone who doesn't believe that Jesus is God to live according to that law of love that Jesus taught, which includes mutual submission, because that culture wasn't ready for that yet.

Christianity came on the scene to work 1. like yeast in a dough ball was one analogy that Jesus used or a 2. mustard seed growing into a huge tree. That was another analogy, meaning that the kingdom of God was going to start small, but gradually change the world from this belief that power-over is good and that some people are better than others and that to appease the gods you need to submit to abuse to the belief that equality and love is good and you don't have to appease any gods at all because you are totally loved by your Creator, God.

And guess what? The wife, as a new believer in this amazing God and this amazing kingdom, can model this new Christian love in her very own home by laying down her rights and doing her part. But again, these verses are also not talking about women who are being abused and mistreated. They are just talking about women who are brand-new followers of this new sect of Christians, but their husbands have not made that same choice — at least not yet.

So I hope that helps clear up any confusion. There are many books written about women from a very different biblical perspective than the one most of my conservative listeners here have heard. And these are books that your pastor or your church or your women's leaders may censor because they will set you as a woman free, and we can't have that.

But here's the other thing: They will also heal your relationship with God, and in many cases, your relationship with the Bible. I mean, not that we have a relationship with a book, but you can feel very much abused by the Bible if you believe the way that some people interpret it. So depending on what your focus and desire is, you may or may not want to dig into any of these books that I will recommend to you, and I'll put the links to these in the show notes.

One is called "What Paul Really Said About Women: The Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality and Marriage, Leadership, and Love." Another book is called "Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul." Another book is called "God's Word to Women." Another book is called "Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman's Place in Church and Family." And then the last recommendation, but definitely not my last recommendation — it's a great book —

“The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth.” That title is on fire, don't you think? All right, let's listen to another question. Here we go.

LISTENER: How do I respond biblically when I have finally confided, — stood up to my husband, been married for eighteen years, we've been in a Bible church together that entire time — finally confided in some leadership and our church that I was in a very emotionally and financially abusive relationship, and the response has been that I need to submit to elder care, and if not, there will be church discipline?

It has been so incredibly painful. I've had my first panic attacks. I can understand why abuse victims don't speak up. But I feel like I'm going to lose my family and everything I've known. What is the correct biblical response? Am I being ungodly and not following Christ by not submitting to that authority?

NATALIE: This is such a great question. I'm so glad she asked this question. The book that I just want to put in everyone's hand right now regarding this question is called “Fraudulent Authority” by Wade Burleson. It covers this topic in such a comprehensive and easy to understand way, and I highly recommend it.

The fact is that the Bible never once teaches that there is any other authority in the church of Jesus Christ other than Jesus Christ. In fact, the Bible explicitly states this just in case anyone would want to make a case otherwise in Matthew 23:8-11: “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.”

This is Jesus trying to let the people know, “Hey, I know that you are Jews and you have these certain ideas, but I'm coming to bring something a little bit different, okay?” And then He goes on to say, “And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and He is in heaven.” Now, He's not referring to, like, daddy, okay? He's referring to your spiritual leaders. “Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Messiah.”

And then in Matthew 28:15, Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” The only authority in the church is Jesus Christ. And pastors and other leaders, what are they? They're not your authority. They submit to the authority of Jesus Christ and then they turn around and serve other people. They serve. Jesus has modeled this when he washed people's feet — washed the feet of his disciples. Anyone who is a leader or a pastor is to be a servant of all, not someone in authority over people. So they're servants, not bosses.

So when your church leaders tell you that you have to submit to their leadership or be kicked out of the church, they are not operating under the authority of Jesus Christ, because that is not what Jesus taught. And what they're actually doing, I'm going to take it a step further and say they are trying to usurp the power and authority of Jesus Christ in your life, which puts them in a very precarious position, because God does not take it lightly when human beings are victimized by leaders who falsely claim to be operating under the auspices of God. Their behavior is a waving red flag that they are wolves in sheep's clothing, and the fact that they are leading an entire church is alarming. No wonder abusive marriages like your own are thriving under their covert attacks on the people of God.

Now, this might be a hard pill to swallow when our brain is programmed with the exact opposite idea that these are good, godly men who mean well. But this is where we need to bypass our brain's programming — this is brainwashing that we've had, honestly — and we need to feel into our body. The way that God designed our bodies is nothing short of miraculous and amazing, and our bodies can pick up on things that our brain will ignore due to its programming. So if you are having panic attacks, that tells me that your body knows that it's unsafe and feels unsafe, and there's always a reason for that.

Yes, we can have panic attacks when we have not processed past trauma because our body is holding onto that trauma and bringing it to our present. But when something like this happens, like what you just described happened to you, this is an indicator that your body is sensing danger. And now we just need to get our brain to catch up to what's going on here, because our brain has been programmed to believe the opposite, and our body is telling us something very different.

So to do that, we need to start speaking the truth out loud, articulating it out loud to ourselves in the mirror. We need to articulate the truth out loud to safe people in our lives, and we also need to keep our body safe. Just think of your body as being like, "This is a precious person, and it's my responsibility to remove this precious person from places where it's unsafe." Eventually as you heal and see the truth more clearly — and by the way, you can really only do that when you're out of the toxic pond. It's hard to heal when you're slurping up toxic sludge every day — but when you can do that and see the truth clearly, then you're going to be able to hold space for yourself even if you are in the presence of these kinds of fraudulent people, because you're no longer hooked into their universe — you know, their whole power-over system.

You will start to see them as the immature people that they are. They're just people grasping for power to make themselves feel good instead of looking to Jesus Christ for

their wellbeing and even getting therapy for their own traumas that have led them to try to fill their buckets by stealing from the buckets of other people.

So the first question that she asked was, "How do I respond biblically?" So here's how I see it. There is this precious human being who's being mistreated and victimized. Just close your eyes and imagine this precious... You could even imagine it as someone who's twelve-years-old being mistreated and victimized. Jesus always reached out in love to people like that. He listened, He held space for them, He invited them into His circle. And also He overthrew the money changers tables and chastised them for turning the temple into a den of thieves. He called out the religious leaders who were victimizing other people and He called them names. He called them a bunch of whitewashed tombs with dead men's bones, and He called them vipers and other nasty names because He was defending the precious human beings that these folks were victimizing.

So in this situation, if Jesus was here — and He is here, by the way, which I'll get to — I believe He would speak truth to the frauds and then gently lead the victim to a safe place. So guess what? He is here. His Holy Spirit is living inside of you, and He has given you the responsibility to be His hands and feet and to enact His love in this world. And it starts with yourself. This is your calling. You speak your truth, and by your truth, that is what is true that's happening to you in this situation — this is God's truth — and then you lead yourself away to a safe place. Jesus didn't hang out with these kinds of people, and you don't have to either. That to me is the Jesus response. I know you used the word, "What's the biblical response?" but I'd like to shift that just a little bit and say this is the Jesus response.

Now, the other part of this question is, "Am I not following Christ by not submitting to their authority?" And to that I just say you have to decide what authority you're going to submit your life to. It's either going to be Jesus or men. There are several cases in the Bible where people followed God and not men, and they were rewarded for it. The Hebrew midwives who disobeyed the government and saved the baby boys? Remember them? Why did they save those baby boys? Why did they disobey the government? Because they chose to submit to God and not men. Peter, Paul, and Silas, they all went to prison at different times. Why? Because they refused to submit to the government or to the religious leaders and chose to submit to God instead.

So am I not following Christ by not submitting to authority? You get to decide who you're going to submit to. I think it's time when we stop listening to human beings and we start listening to God. And His Spirit lives inside of you. To tap into His wisdom, we need to get away from the people who lie and cheat and steal and dip into other

people's buckets and defraud us so that we can get their voices out of our minds and replace them with the voice of Truth and Love.

If we could pull back the curtain on these self-important men, here's what we would see. Just imagine. Remember in "The Wizard of Oz" and they pulled back the curtain, and there, behind the big Wizard of Oz, behind it was just this little guy who was pulling some strings? So here's what we would see. Imagine that we're pulling back the curtain. We're going to see behind the masks of these leaders who are telling you that they're going to kick you out if you don't submit to them. What we see behind the curtain and behind those masks is a bunch of little boys and little girls who really need attention, and they're all stomping their feet and yelling out all the rules of how you get to be in their sandbox club.

Do you really want to play that game? Goodness. You can literally just walk away and be free. And I am speaking as one who did that. And yeah, I was excommunicated and I did lose almost everyone I knew, and also, it was literally the best thing that has ever happened to me. I had been on a religious hook my entire life, and that was the day I got off the hook and walked free.

Now, that's all I have for you today. If you want more of this kind of thing where you can ask questions and get answers, I'm here for it. I hang out in our private forum every day answering questions and coaching members, and we do a live Q&A once a month, and that's on top of being able to dig into core content like the course that we're going to do this month of April on healing our relationship with God. The podcast is helpful — I certainly hope so — but if you want to go deeper, then I invite you into the Flying Free program.

Here's what one member recently wrote to me. "I've been in the program for one month today. My self-assessment scores all went up and I'm feeling stronger. I've been slowly taking everything in and listening to coaching calls. I listened to the entire Butterfly Bootcamp and have completed the lessons through 1.6. My next lesson is 1.7, and I know it is a big one. I'm looking forward to another month and more progress. So thankful I found this program."

So if you want to be part of that, find out what assessment scores are all about, you go to joinflyingfree.com and you can learn more and apply. I just want to thank you so much for listening, and until next time, fly free.