

EXCOMMUNICATION SERIES: MARIEDA'S STORY

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 265 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today, we are kicking off a mini-series of episodes in which you're going to hear from three Christian abuse survivors who were excommunicated from their churches for divorcing their abuser. And this was my experience as well, and if you want to learn more about my story, you can get my new book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, on Amazon.

But I'm not the only one. Thousands of women all over the world who have dared to escape abusive relationships by obtaining legal protection through divorce have been subsequently excommunicated by churches who claim to be representatives of Jesus Christ. Can you imagine Jesus kicking an abuse victim out of His presence for escaping her abuser? It's unthinkable. So, let's meet our first guest in our excommunication series. Her name is Marieda. Welcome!

MARIEDA: Thanks so much, Natalie. I'm so excited to be here.

NATALIE: Okay, so why don't we start off by telling us what denomination were you excommunicated from? Because there are certain denominations that are more excommunicate-y than others. And how many years were you a member in that type of church?

MARIEDA: I attended an evangelical free church and I was a member for fifteen years.

NATALIE: Can you tell us a little bit about what your church meant to you? How were you involved? Did you have friends and family there as well? What was the infrastructure in your life related to your church?

MARIEDA: Well, I grew up in the church, and I always attended the church depending on where I was living. And I have moved a little bit in my adult life. I actually met my husband at the church that I got excommunicated from. We were married there, we were small group leaders there. The church was about 2,000 people, so it was a relatively good-sized church. We were kind of a high-profile couple. I had a ministry for foreign women in our community, and that had been going on for about nine years. And early on I led a women's Bible study. My husband was a deacon and he also was a biblical counselor. And I know you're familiar with the whole biblical counseling movement. All of our friends were from the church.

And within the first few months of our marriage, I sought counseling there because the church was very big on biblical counseling. So that was kind of their claim to fame. But I

started biblical counseling within the first few months of getting married. Then, about year ten, I submitted paperwork for couples counseling for both of us against his wishes.

NATALIE: He was a Bible counselor in that church, right?

MARIEDA: Yes.

NATALIE: So you must have had several of them that were working with that church?

MARIEDA: Yeah. In the whole biblical counseling movement, it's all lay people. And you go through a certification process, and then presto — you're good. You start counseling other people. And so he was one of those, and it's all based on principles of the Bible. But they very much frown on any sort of information that's psychological. "That's not good." But it's all taken from the Bible, which, it sounds good, but they don't believe in depression and things like that. Because the word "depression" isn't in the Bible, so therefore...

NATALIE: ...it doesn't exist.

MARIEDA: And, "You just need to pray harder." And so he was part of this whole thing, I was not. But when we started couples counseling, that was by the senior pastor, and he did it for a year. This is at year ten for us. And then four years later, the couple's counseling, of course, didn't help. And actually, the pastor gave up on us. He said, "Yeah, I can't do anything."

And so then four years later, there was a counseling pastor, and he was kind of head of all of the biblical counselors. And so I went to him and kind of tried to plead my case. Because he was over the biblical counselors and that my husband was one of them, but he did not confront my husband. He told me later that he felt the Holy Spirit would convict him, so he chose not to.

NATALIE: So God doesn't use people, then. He just somehow, supernaturally... A note in the sky or something. Interesting. Okay, so what happened after that? How did you get to the place where you were trying to get help from these other Bible counselors of which your husband was one to the point where you were ready to file for divorce? How many years were you married?

MARIEDA: I was married fourteen years. I didn't get married until I was older. I was forty-four when I got married. It was my first marriage; it was not his first marriage.

NATALIE: Was he divorced, or did his wife die?

MARIEDA: Yes. He had been divorced a couple of times.

NATALIE: Why was he allowed to be a Bible counselor if he was a divorcee? I'm just curious. Did they allow that?

MARIEDA: Well, that's kind of what tripped me up as well. Because he had become a Christian after his last divorce.

NATALIE: If you want to play the game, you have to know the rules. If you become a Christian after all of your sin, then you're good. But if you become a Christian and then you sin and divorce, then you get kicked out. You get the boot. Okay.

MARIEDA: Exactly.

NATALIE: So just a note to everyone: If you want to play the game, you got to know how to play it right.

MARIEDA: Yeah, exactly. I've got to first tell you a little bit about my marriage, and then we'll launch into my whole divorce story. He was kind of a very take-charge kind of guy. He had a very dominant personality. He was very bold in his opinions. He was arrogant. He was defensive. I couldn't question him. I certainly could not disagree with him. And he very much enjoyed being the center of attention. But he was also very charming.

I met him at church and it was kind of one of those typical stories, unfortunately. I, of course, at the time, I was completely ignorant of all of it, but I was love-bombed, and he was in a big rush to get married. And sure enough, we got married in seven months. And the dream crumbled as soon as we got married, literally on the honeymoon. And what's crazy is I've heard the story over and over and over again since. And it's like, "Oh yeah, that was me." Anyway, so all the good behavior ended as soon as we got married.

And then silent treatment was his preferred method to control me. And that started right away. But I was very confused by this because having someone not speaking to you... And there was no talking either. There was not, "You're not seeming to be speaking." "No, I'm not." "It seems that you're not yourself these days because..." "Nope, nope, everything's fine," but it clearly wasn't. And we had horrible communication. And that's what I thought it was. I thought we had communication issues.

NATALIE: I'm just curious, did you ever talk to his ex-wives at all? Just curious.

MARIEDA: Well, no, I did not.

NATALIE: Because that would be interesting to find out why they divorced him, why they got divorced.

MARIEDA: Yeah. I found out later in the — we had to go through this intensive — I found out that he'd left his first wife for his second wife, and I had no idea. He had never told me that in the course of our marriage, that he had actually... Again, communication was just nothing. By the time I actually left, he was spending up to two months living in the basement and not speaking to me. The crazy part was is he would sit by me in church with his hands raised and amen-ing really loud.

NATALIE: Of course. Gotta play the role.

MARIEDA: And leaving in a different car to go home, to go live in the basement. So that was my marriage. Most of it was about his reputation and all of it. So then when I left: It was COVID. And he's living in the basement again and I'm on leave from my job, but things were escalating, in my opinion. He's now doing this basement thing and things are escalating, but I'm also seeing that this is a pattern. I'm starting to become aware and I'm starting to Google "silent treatment." I'm getting the beginning little trickles of information about all of this kind of stuff.

So it's COVID and my mom says, "Come and visit me." And I'm like, "You know what? He can ignore me just as easily if I'm in a different place than if I'm here, and so I might as well go." So I did. I packed my suitcase for six days. That's what I planned on being gone for — six days — and I left a note on the counter and I said, "I'm at mom's. Don't forget to give the cat the medicine."

And so I didn't leave without letting him know where I was or why — he claimed I abandoned him. On my way to my mom's — and she lives in a different state — I decided, "You know what, I'm done. I'm going to tell my whole family of origin. I'm going to tell them what is really going on in this marriage." Because up until now, I haven't. I've been silent about all of it. I've bought hook, line, and sinker, "You don't ever say anything about your husband." So I decided that I would tell them what was going on. And they were shocked, but then kind of not shocked, because they had witnessed all of this for fourteen years as well. But they didn't quite know that it had been as bad as it was. But they did all agree that I needed to talk to my pastor.

And so I called and made a phone appointment to talk to the pastor. I ended up talking to the pastor, I talked to the associate pastor, and I talked to, again, that counseling

pastor. And I talked to them all several times. I talked to each of them at least two times over the next few days. I remember one of them asking me if I was afraid of him — my husband — hitting me. And it flew out of my mouth — I said, “I'm not afraid of him hitting me. I'm afraid of him shooting me.” But he had never shot anybody before. I'm guessing that's why they weren't too terribly concerned about that.

NATALIE: You have to have prior shootings in order to think someone's dangerous.

MARIEDA: I'm thinking if someone told me that they were afraid of being shot, you might take it seriously, but they did not. Once I let the cat out of the bag and I talked to all of them, I knew that they were then going to remove him from being a biblical counselor, and then there was going to be a price to pay because he very much enjoyed the prestige of that. So the bottom line was I never returned home after that.

NATALIE: Good for you.

MARIEDA: So I packed for six days and then never returned.

NATALIE: That's amazing. A lot of victims, it takes several times of doing it. That you were able to just make that decision and get out...

MARIEDA: I was scared, though. I didn't know what was going to happen to me. And all I knew was that it was escalating. It kept getting worse. The punishments kept getting worse. And by then, though, I've started reading books and I'm realizing that crazy things happen once these guys get... And I was really too scared to return. So I don't know what would have happened.

NATALIE: Okay, good. So what was the church's reaction, then? Were they supportive? Doesn't sound like maybe they were.

MARIEDA: Well, no, at first it sounded like they were supportive. They were, “Oh, yes, yes, yes.” They were very, very supportive. But they sent us to a three-day intensive.

NATALIE: Oh yeah, that's always the solution.

MARIEDA: Yes, yes. In that three-day intensive, the very first words out of the counselor's mouth was, “Divorce is not an option. We're not going to talk about divorce.” And to be quite honest with you, I wasn't even there mentally. I mean, I kind of knew that I couldn't go home, but I was not planning on divorcing. That wasn't really something I was contemplating at that point in time. I was just begging for help,

basically. But we spent three days discussing forgiveness.

NATALIE: You were supposed to forgive him?

MARIEDA: Yes. Because the other thing too about biblical counseling, it's all very sin mutualizing. So it's like, "Well, you're both sinners." And so therefore basically everything equals out and not one person is going to be charged with anything. You just have to forgive and forget — that kind of thing.

NATALIE: It's basically saying there's no such thing as abuse, except maybe if you're being beaten a lot.

MARIEDA: Yes, exactly. So then after the intensive, which was completely ineffective because he still wasn't talking to me, I went back to my mom. So this whole time I'm traveling back and forth. I went out for the intensive and then came back. So then we have to go to our biblical counseling, and so I'm coming back for that. And we did that for about four months and he's still not talking to me, he's not texting me, he's not calling me, he's not speaking to me. So I get the point. And so I kept coming back.

And after four months of that, I said in the counseling, "I don't want to continue this anymore. But I will continue if we can go to professional counseling." And of course, that was like asking him to get involved in witchcraft or something. I don't know. That was completely, "Oh, we can't do that." He said that he would think about it, but then he never told me. And so the long and short of it is after two months of waiting for his decision about whether or not we could do professional counseling, I filed for divorce.

NATALIE: Yeah. Because you're getting nothing. You're married to a dead jalopy on the side of the road. It's like, what do you do? Let's call it. Time of death.

MARIEDA: Exactly. Time of death. That is exactly what it was.

NATALIE: And so what did your church do then at that point when you filed for divorce? What was your church's reaction to that? Were they supportive at first or did they just go right to vilifying you?

MARIEDA: I told my biblical counselor, and I didn't hear anything from the church. I had waited for two months and I filed, and then I told my biblical counselor at some point in time — I can't remember exactly when. But after a month and a half after I filed, I got a call from my biblical counselor, and she said that the elders have asked me to come into town and that they wanted to meet with me because they wanted to help me.

And I remember I started crying. I said, "I have been begging for help for years, and now they want to help me? A month and a half after I've filed?" I'm like, "It's too late." So that was pretty devastating. And then a month after that, I got excommunicated. And that was kind of interesting because never did I ever hear back from any of the pastors that I originally talked to the very first weeks that I had left. And I talked to several of them several times and I never heard back from one of them. Not an email, not a text, not a phone call, no nothing.

NATALIE: I hear that story all the time and it's what happened to me too. I don't know what it is about these people. It's as if you don't even exist. Okay, so what kind of help do you think they were going to offer you if you were to venture a guess? Because they offer you help, you say no, and then a month later they excommunicate you. I don't get it.

MARIEDA: No. I don't believe that they actually were going to help me. This is complete speculation — I think that they were going to tell me if I don't return, they will excommunicate me. And I think that in a real twisted way they think that that's helping me, that that's a loving thing to do to let me know that the right thing to do is to return, and if I don't, then this is the consequence. I believe that that's what they were going to do.

I don't think that there was any help whatsoever. If they were going to help me, why did I need to come into town and see them all face to face? And it's all, of course, a bunch of men against me. If they were going to confront my husband or do anything, I think that they would have done that. I wouldn't have to come into town for a meeting for that.

NATALIE: Right. I can tell you from my own experience, because I did go to the meeting where they wanted to help me and I talked to other women who have too, and exactly what you think it was going to be, that's exactly what it was going to be. The story is textbook. It's the same story across the board. It's just unreal. So do you feel like your church represented the heart and character of Jesus Christ throughout this whole process?

MARIEDA: I kid you not, during this whole process... And I'm a mess. I'm an absolute mess. I'm living at my mom's, I'm a grown woman, my husband won't speak to me, but all I kept thinking is that my church, if they had been around when the Israelites were being released from Egypt, they'd have been on the side of the road going, "Go back. Submit more. Suffer for Jesus. Slavery is for your holiness," because that was kind of the party line that I received.

It had been eight months from the time I left and talked to all the pastors till the time I filed. And then it was still a couple months after that when I got excommunicated. But I really do feel like they would have encouraged all the Israelites to go back. "Go back into slavery. This isn't what God wants for you. Pray more. Trust God and pray more."

NATALIE: Yes. Was the excommunication a surprise to you?

MARIEDA: Yes.

NATALIE: Tell me what you were thinking.

MARIEDA: I could not have been any more surprised. It came in a certified letter. This is how naïve I was. I'm like, "Oh, that's odd. I'm getting a letter." I'm at my mom's house and it's certified. And the only thing I can think of is it was going to be a letter thanking me for my faithful tithing because that's the only kind of letter I've ever gotten from the church. So I open it up and I could not have been any more surprised.

The only two other excommunications that I remember from my church in all that time, there were two. One early on was somebody who was addicted to porn. Now, clearly they've stopped doing that because it's not like porn has diminished in popularity within the church, so they stopped doing it. And then the second one was somebody who had had an affair and wasn't willing to end the affair. So I remember two excommunications, but I clearly wasn't either one of those things, and so I could not have been more surprised.

NATALIE: Okay. Can I read just a little excerpt from your letter?

MARIEDA: Yeah.

NATALIE: Okay: "Your unwillingness to submit to biblical counsel..." How many months did you submit to biblical counsel do you think it was? Years!

MARIEDA: Well, years!

NATALIE: Yeah, years — years and years and years — but they accused you of being unwilling to do that. They must have expected that you would do that until you were on your dying bed, right? "...and subsequent divorce without biblical grounds" — according to them — "requires us to excommunicate you from the church. Your sin of unbelief and pride..." Was he excommunicated?

MARIEDA: No.

NATALIE: No. So he doesn't get accused of being an unbeliever or of being prideful for mistreating his wife for fourteen years, but, "Your sin of unbelief and pride are ultimately against God" — so says they — "but also your husband." So it's against your husband too. Your pride against your husband. In other words, here's what I've realized. These churches actually truly believe that husbands have a right to mistreat their wives. That's the bottom line. Because if they didn't, this wouldn't be happening. And if you don't submit to mistreatment, you are prideful and you are an unbeliever.

"It demonstrates a willingness to sin unrestrained against God." You have unrestrained sin against God for running as fast as you can from someone who's abused you for fourteen years. They don't have unrestrained sin against God. Just you do for not being willing to be a whipping boy for your husband. "Whipping boy" — I mean that in an allegorical way. "You are known in this body. This sin is not hidden and the body is impacted. Whether you are blind to your sin or simply don't care..." Now they're accusing you of not caring? And I'm guessing you're the one who initiated every single time for getting help.

MARIEDA: Every single time, yes.

NATALIE: But, "You don't care." The guy who doesn't talk to you, he cares. But you, for trying to get help for fourteen years, you don't care. They're confused by this. Again, because in their universe, women should like to get whooped. "Why don't you, you little sinner? Get back under there." "Any of us can fall into sin, but high-handed sin..." they called your sin high-handed. Oh my gosh. I just can't even. I am literally crawling out of my skin. "Your high-handed sin against God is a dangerous domain, especially for those that claim Christ and have identified with the church."

This is satanic. I just want you to know this is satanic. These words are written from a place of alignment with the adversary, not alignment with Jesus Christ. They have twisted everything and turned it upside down. I will stop there.

MARIEDA: I think they will have to answer someday for this.

NATALIE: Oh, they absolutely will. I want other people to understand... Because there's people who are listening who have gone through this, and some of them might even be crying right now because it's going to bring up a lot of stuff. Others are going to be maybe upset about it but not really understand it.

But I think it's important for us to know how it makes a woman feel in her body to be accused by the devil — who is the accuser of the brethren — to be accused by the devil through people who claim to be representatives of Jesus Christ, who claim to be shepherds. These are not real shepherds, by the way. These are pretend shepherds. They are pretending to shepherd the flock and they usher in the wolves and say...

MARIEDA: They're protecting the wolves.

NATALIE: Yes. They're allowing the wolves to come in and then they're protecting the wolves when the wolves attack the sheep. That's why I'm saying it's totally satanic. This is not Christ. So how do you feel in your body when I read those words back to you or when you read them the first time?

MARIEDA: It's a gut punch. And I just want to say, "How dare you?" This is like when I come up off of the floor after sobbing. I have been a member of this church for years and I'm very much a part of the church. I'm not just like the Sunday morning churchgoer. I'm there, I'm serving. And so for them to decide that I don't love the Lord — because I don't think you read that part, but they tell me that I don't love the Lord — and I'm like, "How dare you?" And they preach all the time about not judging motives and things like that, that you can't do that. But they told me that I don't love the Lord. That's nuts!

NATALIE: Because they don't want you to question their motives. That's why they say those things. And the other thing, this is such a betrayal. You trusted them. For fourteen years you kept going to them trusting that they had your best interest in mind when they were all the time on the back end, whether they knew it consciously or not, but I believe they're aligned with the enemy. Again, whether they know it or not, they are definitely not aligned with Christ.

They're plotting on the back end to make sure that you continue to be in the jaws of the wolf that's been assigned to you. And you trusted them to help you to get out. And when you finally got out by the skin of your teeth, they're going to come after you and say that you don't love Jesus. It's just unbelievable. All right, first of all, how are you doing today? How long ago was this? When did this all happen?

MARIEDA: I left three and a half years ago. And then two and a half years ago I relocated. I had to go to a different city and I started all over. I'm sixty years old. Fortunately, I have a job. That's the blessing. I had a job and I could transfer, and so I did. Because when I realized I didn't have a husband to go back to and I didn't have a church to go back to, that kind of made it easy. I'm like, well, I've got to go somewhere

else. I don't have anything left. My whole life was wrapped up in the church.

So I transferred and I moved to a different city, and it's been crazy because through Facebook groups that you have for Christian women who have escaped these kinds of marriages, I have become friends. We have a group of twelve at this point in my particular city.

NATALIE: That is amazing.

MARIEDA: We meet regularly. It's not like we have meetings, but we have a group chat and we're constantly helping one another because we're all in different stages of either healing or getting out. And so that's what's amazing to me because for those of us who have gone through this, even our supporters, it's so confusing because it hasn't been talked about very much until now. And so that's what I so appreciate about your show and what you're doing is because it's just educating people like me who were just oblivious.

And then when you finally realize, "Oh, that's my story." The feeling that we have, the twelve of us, we literally have a sisterhood. Literally, if somebody texted at three in the morning and said, "Somebody come get me," we'd go. It would be more than one person. It would be a group of us.

And so we're very much there for each other, and I just wish other people would start realizing that yeah, this is out there and it's in the church. I think that that's the big problem. I think that everybody thinks, "Oh, that's not in the church." But the problem is it is in the church. That's where we need help because there are domestic violence places all over, but everybody kind of thinks, "Oh, but that's not here."

NATALIE: When you think of domestic violence shelters, you think of people who are getting beat. They're being physically abused. And mostly in the church, I think a lot... Like my ex-husband, he never would have hit me. He knew where to draw the line where he wouldn't get caught or where he wouldn't lose his reputation. And I could tell there were times he wanted to hit me, but he didn't. And there were times that I would look at him like, "Do it. Just do it."

MARIEDA: And when I went through the year of counseling with the senior pastor, he actually said to me, "At least you're not being beaten." And I was so shocked by that, and I remember saying, "I didn't realize that was the standard you're holding for these men."

NATALIE: Yes. Their standards are basically, "Don't beat your wife, don't cheat on her, and then make sure that you show up at home most of the time." That's the standard for men. Good job, church. It's amazing. "And if your wife leaves, have no fear. We will just excommunicate her."

MARIEDA: That's what happened to me. And what's really ironic is from what I've heard — I still have no contact — but my husband doesn't go to church now at all, or doesn't go there.

NATALIE: Yeah, mine doesn't either.

MARIEDA: I am in church. I have a new church and I am going. I don't know if I'm going to become a member again, though.

NATALIE: Yes. I'm not going to church right now, but I have sworn to myself that if I ever do get involved in a church again, I will never sign any papers with them. I will love them because they are my brothers and sisters in Christ, but I'll never sign contracts with them. I just had this thought just a few days ago. I thought, the place where the most persecution against Christians is actually happening is in the church. That is where Christians, at least in our modern countries, are being persecuted. If you had one message to offer to Christians who say that they love and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, what would that message be?

MARIEDA: Now, are you talking about the people who aren't being abused or the people that are being abused?

NATALIE: Just anyone who's a Christian.

MARIEDA: I would say believe her. Nobody makes this... I mean, okay. Yes, you might have some sort of percent of people who made this up, but most of us aren't making it up. I was begging for help for years and nobody wanted... I don't necessarily know that no one believed me — they didn't know how to help. And the other thing too is I was keeping quiet because I was maintaining his reputation and I was praying more and fasting more and memorizing scripture.

You know what, this is my answer: My answer is you cannot change someone else by praying enough and fasting enough and believing. If they don't want to be changed by God, they're not going to be changed by God. I cannot do it, but I did believe it for many, many years. If I just did this enough then he would be nicer to me, we would have a happy marriage, whatever.

NATALIE: You're put in this impossible situation where you are actually responsible for fixing this abusive person, and that's not possible. Churches, when a person comes up and presents like you and it's been going on for a while, why don't they just say, "Your husband doesn't seem to care about the relationship. You don't have to stay. Do you want to get out? If you want to get out, if you feel like you're done, we are 100% behind you. We'll help you. We'll help you get out of this relationship."

And then if he comes back and says, "Well, what are you doing? That's not fair." Say, "Well, sounds like you need to change your behavior. Maybe if you did that, it would work out. But if you're not willing to do that work, then she's going to leave." It's basically just supporting you with your boundary and actually teaching you that you have a boundary. That you can say, "This relationship is not working for me, and I don't have to stay in it for the rest of my life."

MARIEDA: I was reading all the marriage books. All of it was the wife submit more, pray more, keep a cleaner house, have more sex. That was all the line that I was given, and I'm really glad I don't believe that now.

NATALIE: Yeah, it doesn't work.

MARIEDA: It doesn't work.

NATALIE: Yeah. And when you're married to a healthy person, you do all of those things together. You both do those things. That's not the rule book for women. It's a rule book for healthy adult human beings who want to have interpersonal relationships, whether you're married or not. All right, this was amazing to have this conversation with you. I'm fascinated how your story is very similar to mine in a lot of aspects. Are you in Flying Higher, or not?

MARIEDA: No, I'm not in Flying Higher.

NATALIE: Okay. Well, I'm going to do a plug for Flying Higher anyway. If you were in it, I was going to say, "Do you want to talk about it a little bit?"

But I want to let the listeners know about it because Flying Higher is a program for women who are divorced, and there are a lot of them who got excommunicated when they divorced their abusive husbands. And in that program, we do work on rebuilding your life. So we don't necessarily address past trauma, we don't do anything like that. It's more moving forward, like from the point of your divorce forward.

So we do a lot of work on parenting with older kids — that's like a big topic — restarting a career or going back to school, new relationships — like dating relationships. And there are several courses and we do weekly coaching. Actually this last year we did book studies and we went through twelve transformative books together. And this next year in 2024, we're going to be doing more book studies if you want to — those are optional. The coursework is always there for you to go through, but the book studies are just for fun. But we're going to do twelve fun fiction books together. So kind of like a little book club on the side. But people have made good friendships in Flying Higher too.

So if you're interested in that, you can learn more by going to joinflyinghigher.com. I don't talk about that very much on the podcast because most of our listeners are still in their marriage relationships trying to figure out what's going on, but there are a few that are already divorced, and maybe you're wondering if there's anything for you. And if you're feeling lost, then that's a good place to make some connections with people. All right you guys, that's all we have.

MARIEDA: Thanks so much, Natalie.