

EXCOMMUNICATION SERIES: JANET'S STORY

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 267 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we are doing our third and last interview in a series of episodes on the topic of excommunication. And so let's meet our third guest in our excommunication series. Her name is Janet. Welcome, Janet.

JANET: Thank you so much for having me. Thank you for giving a voice to those of us who have been through this.

NATALIE: I really appreciate you being willing to be vulnerable and share your story. I'm sure this was not easy emotionally to go back and relive some of these things. Why don't we start by having you tell us what denomination you were excommunicated from and how long were you a member or involved in that denomination?

JANET: So this was a very young Reformed Baptist church. I want to say it probably just started maybe in 2015 or 2016. One lead pastor, and then when we joined there was one elder in addition to that pastor, and they called themselves the two elders. So very tiny leadership, and that was in 2019. So that was after this church had been established for several years.

We actually joined right before COVID. It was March of 2020 when we joined this church. And so really we started off our membership doing things online and social distancing. And so the excommunication officially happened in September of 2023.

NATALIE: Just curiously, did you go ahead and pretty soon after you started going there sign membership papers or some kind of contract or something?

JANET: We started attending in, it would have been summer of 2019, and we had to go to a membership class, which was an all-day thing, and they answered a lot of questions, but whatever we signed, to me it just seemed like your typical membership covenant. Yes, we did sign something, but at that time there were no red flags in it. It didn't say anything that I felt like was suspicious. I've since gone back and read it, and I admit that I can't entirely remember everything that's in it, but what I was looking for was, were there red flags in this? And it didn't seem like there were.

NATALIE: When you went back and re-read it, I'm just curious, was there anything in there about divorce? Was there anything that would have given you a hint that this could have happened, that you could be excommunicated if you decided to get a divorce?

JANET: No, and that's what I was looking for when I went back to read it. I know that we'll get into this, but my excommunication was not because of divorce. It wasn't the divorce that they had the problem with. It was my questioning them about other things.

NATALIE: Okay. I'm interested to definitely talk with you about that. So your involvement probably wasn't super high level just because of COVID. You just joined and then COVID hit. Did you have any other friends and family that went to church there? How well did you know the other people?

JANET: We ended up there because we were at a different church. It was an Acts 29 church, and they would have also said that they were a Reformed church. So we were at this other church for about seven years, and toward the end of our time there, I had begun approaching the leadership about problems in my marriage. I was at the point where I couldn't even put my finger really on what it was I needed help with. I just felt like I needed to talk to somebody.

So we had been at this other church for seven years. I started speaking to people about the issues in the marriage, and this was toward the end of 2018. And so I was really surprised that I was told by one pastor there that I was in great sin and that I needed to just get over it, move forward.

NATALIE: What was your great sin just curiously? What was it?

JANET: I think it was the fact that I just wouldn't let things go and move on, whatever that was supposed to mean. And what I was trying to convey to these people... And again, this is the church prior to the one that we're going to talk about with the excommunication, but stories build, so this ended up really being the reason that I wanted to leave that church is because I was just put in this position where I was clearly asking for help. This had been going on for years and years and years. I was at the end of my rope. I didn't know what to do. And of course, naturally, one would think if I'm going to go to anybody for help, it should be my pastors, right?

So they really blew it off and told me that I was in great sin and really treated it as a 50/50 thing. And at that point I hadn't recognized it as abuse in the marriage, so I was still at the point of not understanding that I was not culpable, that I had done everything that I could do. I was still being told that I needed to look in the mirror and I still needed to go on more dates, just all that nonsense that you hear from people.

And so we actually moved about thirty minutes away, and so I was glad because that was an easier excuse to leave that church than the fact that I couldn't stand the

pastors. And I don't know if I mentioned this — I think that I forgot to say this — but after I went to those pastors, when I went to the lead pastor about it at that church, he actually asked my ex-husband to be an elder the week after I cried on the phone to him and told him some of what was going on.

NATALIE: They just completely dismissed your voice and what you were expressing and your cries for help. Not only dismissed it, but then actually turned towards the person who was hurting you and invited that person, your husband, to be part of the leadership team of the church.

JANET: Yes. And thankfully he had the decency — I don't know what overcame him — but he knew that he didn't belong in leadership there.

NATALIE: That's amazing.

JANET: So he declined that, thank goodness.

NATALIE: So he was more mature in some ways than these church leaders were as far as understanding what's going on.

JANET: Right. I think that he was aware. I think that he's been aware of what he has done. He knows what he's done. But this other church that we ended up going to, the Reformed Baptist one, he had met the pastor and the one elder at the time, had just seen them in a coffee shop. They had Bibles open and my ex-husband was in this coffee shop, just started talking to these guys and I think mentioned to them, "Our family might be looking for a new church." They gave them a card and said, "Come visit."

So I looked them up online. I wasn't terribly impressed, but I thought, "Well, we'll kind of check this out." And people that we had known from the previous church, the one that we had just left, had left that church and gone to this other place now that we're going to talk about with the excommunication. So we did know some people there.

It was pretty small, it was intimate, so we were able to connect with people pretty quickly. I liked how welcome we felt. The members felt like they genuinely wanted to get to know us and other people. And I think part of that too is that I really wanted out of the other church and I really wanted to belong somewhere where I felt like, "Now I can start fresh and I can tell the pastors from the very beginning what's going on."

NATALIE: Sure. Was this the same denomination?

JANET: The other one was Acts 29, which, they espoused a Reformed theology. They would preach from that point of view. The one that we ended up joining was Reformed Baptist.

NATALIE: Okay. It's still a very similar theology, though, especially when it comes to men and women.

JANET: Yes. And the Acts 29 church I would say was Baptist in that they baptized professed believers, people who would come forward as adults or whatever age. So I really didn't see many differences in the beginning.

NATALIE: So when did things start to go wrong then? And I'm wondering too, when did you start realizing, "Oh my word, these problems, now I know what these problems are," and you could maybe put words to it and put a definition to it?

JANET: I can remember clearly that was June of 2020 because during COVID I had time on my hands like everybody else did, and I pondered these things. You're with this person now 24/7 with no escape. And so I don't quite remember what got me looking up abuse. I think it was because of the incident that I clearly remember. I was talking to a lady. The church had started to reconvene in the parking lot of a building where the church was meeting. So this church did not meet in a typical church building. It met in a YMCA. And during the pandemic, they were given permission to meet in the parking lot outside, so that was what we did.

And I can remember talking to a lady who had been divorced — she was at the time divorced — and just telling her my frustration, expressing to her, "This is so hard, and my marriage is so difficult." And what she said just turned everything around for me. She explained to me that garden-variety marriage problems can be solved and can be helped with these things like marriage counseling and retreats and these things that work when both people are on board, both people are pursuing growth and help. But she said, "In cases of abuse, that's not going to work." And I was just astounded. I thought, "Wow, how did I not see this sooner?"

And so immediately I dove in. I started researching. It was at some time during this point that I found you and so many others that talk about abuse. But the first book I ever read was *Healing from Hidden Abuse* by Shannon Thomas, and just a bunch of others followed that. So things started to go wrong because I started becoming enlightened and I started understanding. And these things came to the surface, and once I saw them, they wouldn't go away.

And I was so tired. It had been twenty-two years, and I had so much courage and I thought, "Nothing I have ever done has changed anything." So I started talking to the pastors about it. I met with them regularly at this time — it was just the pastor and the one elder — and they sat and they listened and they were gracious. They didn't interrupt, but I do remember one of them saying to me, "Janet, you just need to realize that all marriages have problems."

NATALIE: I hope not all marriages are abusive. Good grief.

JANET: When he said that to me, my feathers started to get ruffled. And I said to him, "Yeah, but I need for you to understand that this isn't a typical marriage. That's not what I'm talking about." So I made it a point to continue to meet with these guys, and over time, that one elder, his term ended. And so he just slipped back into the congregation as a regular member, and then two more were brought on.

And so what ended up happening was I would meet with these guys, the pastor and two elders, so three elders is what they consider themselves, three elders. They use the terms interchangeably. If you're a pastor, you're an elder. If you're an elder, you're a pastor. One of them never met with me to do with any of this stuff — I talked to him and we were friends — but it was really primarily, I'll just call them J and M, who were the ones that I met with.

So the point of these meetings was just for me to check in, just let them know my frustrations. They would say things to me like, "We don't have any immediate solutions for you, but we're here. We believe you — you can talk to us." And so for a while, I was satisfied.

But things did start to go wrong when, in early 2022, my ex-husband and I separated. And it was like these pastors had no idea what to do with it. It's a young church. They're young. There are people that are separated within the church. So their solution was, "We're going to form a care team." That was what they called it. And what this was was a group that consisted of... I mean, this sounds terrible now that I think about it, but it was me and my advocates and my ex-husband and his advocates.

NATALIE: Let's just go on the battlefield and have a war.

JANET: Right? It was crazy. And the whole thing was just convoluted from the beginning and I knew it. And the reason I went along with it is for me, I was exhausted. This is twenty-two years of this stuff, but they hadn't seen it. They didn't know. So I had to give these people a chance to think that they were helping. It's almost like I had already

been in it for the long haul, but I kind of had to give them a chance to see nothing that you do is going to work.

NATALIE: That's so fascinating because I remember being in that place and thinking the exact same thing. So what was your thinking? Why did you think that they had to buy in in order for you to take steps to protect yourself?

JANET: I was still in the mindset of, "This is my church. I have the right to be here. I want these people to know the truth." I hadn't come to the point yet of realizing that it didn't matter if they knew the truth or not, that it didn't matter if I was at that church or not. So I felt like I needed the validation from them. I needed them to know that he really was abusive. But from the beginning I just knew because every other experience that I had had ended up being invalidated, treated as 50/50, treated as, "You need to move on." And so things just went from bad to worse.

I can remember one time when this care team was supposed to meet. The thing about it is we would meet in the church office and for the first part of the meeting, I wouldn't be allowed in. It would just be the other people, not my ex-husband. He would always show up later, so I would get there before he did. The people would all convene. They would talk without me being in the room. Which now looking back, I'm thinking I should have been around for the entire thing. I mean, they're talking about me.

But I have to confess, I would sit there and eavesdrop because they talked kind of loud, so I would still hear a lot of what they were saying. And what they were saying were things like that my ex-husband, that they were encouraged by his behavior because, "He really seemed to be improving." Now, mind you, it had been like a month or two. And we all know how ridiculous that is.

But one day before the meeting, so it was maybe two or three hours before a meeting, the elder called me on the phone. I had not communicated with him or the other one about this for probably two or three weeks. He calls me right before the meeting and says, "Hey, I know we have a care team meeting today. I kind of need to catch up on what's going on." And it made me furious. I thought, "I cannot believe..." I just knew that they lumped me in with every other church issue, good or bad. I didn't matter. It was one more thing for them to have to take care of and they had created this care team so that it could look like they were taking steps toward doing something for us.

NATALIE: What? I still don't understand... I know what they want to do, but what did you think that they were going to do?

JANET: I think there was still some hope in me that at some point they would realize just what a joke this was.

NATALIE: And then what?

JANET: And then, honestly, I don't know. I think then I thought that maybe my ex-husband would fade away. At this point, we were still separated; we weren't divorced. I thought that at some point maybe they would ask him to leave the church. That was my thinking in my head — he would be the one shunned from the church. And it always makes me laugh to think that the joke was on me. Little did I know that it was going to be me.

NATALIE: Can I just jump in and say something here? Because I'm just having this epiphany right now. What we really wanted — and I see this so much with abuse survivors — we're the kinds of personalities that really, really want connection — deep, intimate relationships. And when we join a church or we get involved in a group or we have a new friend or whatever, we are all in and we're like, "Let's connect. I'm ready to give my 100% and I just trust that you're ready to give your 100%."

And then because we have this big problem... It's a big problem when you have your intimate partner is abusing you on a regular basis and nothing's ever changing. So of course you're going to share your big problem with these people that you want to connect with, and you fully believe that they're going to believe you, enter into your world, and then support you in that by helping, brainstorming options like, "How do we deal with a situation like this?" but instead we got betrayed. We were totally betrayed.

Because in churches like this with theologies like this, there's a lot of sin mutualizing. Not just in marital issues, but anytime anyone has a problem with anyone, it's like, "Okay, well, you both have equal amounts of sin on your side," which is not true. There are many, many situations in the world where one person sins against another and the victim's sin is not on trial because she or he has been victimized, right? But there's a lot of sin mutualizing.

And then, of course, there's so much suspicion towards women. There's just an ingrained kind of idea that women are the problem, especially if you're the one going and asking for help. You're viewed as, "Oh, great. Now we have another problem. This woman is stirring the pot. She's complaining about her husband." And maybe their wives have complained about them, so now they're taking up an offense for one another as men and, "Yeah, it sounds like my wife." I really think a lot of men that are in Christian leadership are actually control freaks and abusers themselves. And so they're

aligning themselves or identifying with the abusers of women who come forward and want help.

I just had to throw that out there because I don't really know that I knew what they could do — all I knew is that I wanted connection. I just wanted to be enveloped in a community of love and intimacy and connection. The betrayal was so... Was it not just like a slap in the face? Just so crazy.

JANET: It is because it costs us a lot to share these intimate details. And I am now on the other side of this so aware of how precious it is to sit with another individual and just be honored that they would take the time but also trust me with the intimate details of things that have happened to them. I felt like every time I went to these people I was throwing my pearls to pigs.

But you don't know where else to go if you can't go to your own pastor who's supposed to be a shepherd. They are supposed to tenderly love their flock, which is what Christ commanded them to do, and they don't do it. It's so confusing. Here you are expending this energy already to share this story, which is shameful. Who wants to go and talk about the abuse that they're having in their marriage and be that person? But then to have it turned around on you makes it just so much worse.

Another thing that was awful about this care team was part of the deal was that they wanted to see me get counseling with a guy in that church. And the thing is, they weren't paying for it. Here I am spending \$100 an hour on this guy who did not want to just jump into these issues. He expected me to go back and start all over with, "Let's talk about the day you were born." And I'm thinking, I have been in counseling since 2015 for issues that pertain to my own life, not necessarily to do with my ex. Now's the time that I want to talk about this man who has been abusing me. I don't want to rehash everything that I've already hashed out with somebody else.

It was not going to be on my terms, Natalie. They were going to tell me how I needed to heal. They had no idea and they even confessed, "We don't really know how to handle this. This is the first time this kind of thing has come up." Yet they were just adamant about me doing things the way that they wanted me to do it.

So things really went wrong. Deciding factor for me was there was an incident. They had promised to address a stressful situation for me to do with my then-husband. It had to do with how we were sitting in church. I felt uncomfortable about it. I wanted them to talk to him about it. I didn't have a solution for it, but I thought, "I feel like a prisoner in my own church." One of those elders even said, "Well, why don't you sit in

the lobby and watch the stream?" And I said to him, "I shouldn't be the one being punished. I'm not the one being abusive." So they promised me that they would address that. And then they didn't.

So I finally emailed them and said, "I've had enough. You all promised me this. You did not follow through. This just won't do." And they got mad at me. They got defensive. Before I was having to set up an appointment with them — not the care team, but just to talk to the pastors — six weeks in advance. You better believe that when I sent them this email, all of a sudden it's like all this free time came up. "Well, you need to meet with us right now." I told them, "I will not do it. I have met with you and talked to you and told you everything, and there is nothing more that I have to say." And that was when they pushed me to the point of saying, "You know what? I'm done. Take me off of membership. I'm done." And they lost it.

NATALIE: Wow. So they want you to live with a man and sleep with a man who's treating you like dirt, but as soon as you just set a boundary, just a normal, healthy, adult boundary, they lose their minds. That's very fascinating.

JANET: And what they were cloaking it in was, "Okay, fine. We will remove you from membership. It's not your divorce that's the problem. We believe that you have grounds for divorce." Which, I didn't need their permission anyway, but thanks. But no, they said that I either needed to meet in person with them one more time to discuss these things or I needed to tell them what "gospel preaching church" I was attending. And if I would do one of those things, supposedly they were going to let me go with a "clean record," whatever that is supposed to mean too, and that would be that.

And I told them no. I said, "I will not meet with you anymore," because I thought that is a trap that I would walk right into. I'm not going to meet with a bunch of men on their turf in their office to have them attack and accuse me one more time. And I thought, number one, right now at that moment, I didn't want to go to church. I still had a very strong relationship with Christ. I just had some things that I needed to work out and I didn't know when I would go back into a church building. I felt like it wouldn't be forever, but just right then I needed to do what would help me at that moment. I needed to honor how I felt then. And I thought if I were going to a church, it's not their business where I'm going. Why would I tell them so that they can turn around and write a letter to that church telling them whatever it is that they want to tell them?

NATALIE: Yeah, and they would. The elders at my church that excommunicated me actually went and talked to the elders of... I don't know how they found out what church I was going to but they found out somehow, and then they went and talked to

the elders of the church I was going to warn them about me. And the only reason I knew about that is because those elders called me on the phone to tell me. I could not believe it. So it's true. What you did, your instinct that that's possibly what they might do, that's exactly what they would have done. It's so abusive.

JANET: That was in September of 2022. On March 7th, 2023... They had sent me several letters. Like clockwork, about every three months, they would send me a letter and it would say something to the effect of, "We have tried reaching out to you and you're still not responding." And my response had been clear back in September: "Leave me alone. No, I will not do this." "No" is an answer. It's a sentence with a period on the end of it. But they wouldn't take it for my answer.

And so on March 7th of 2023 they sent me an email, and I just want to read a little bit of some of the things that they started accusing me of. So they said that, "Forgiveness cannot be conditioned upon the quality of the offender's repentance. You have set yourself up as the arbiter of truth, grounded in independent study of trauma and relational therapeutics. The problem is not the study. The concern is that you have positioned yourself as the only enlightened one. Therefore, your conclusions are superior and no one else can even speak to you on these matters. This has resulted in incorrigibility. This has gone so far that you have written that the church as a whole is not a place you can be," which I did not tell them that. I told them their specific church was a place that I couldn't be.

So they said, "It is frightening to conclude that God's plan for your Christian life is impossible for you," which, I never said that. And then they said, "All we have ever desired to hear from you is a humble acknowledgment of this: 'Although understandable and normal, my sinful responses in my marriage are wrong. I agree with God's word that we are to forgive others as we have been forgiven in Christ, but I'm having an impossibly difficult time with this. I am a sinner in need of much grace, and I need help.'"

NATALIE: Okay, you know what? They literally accused you of all of their own sins, the exact sins that they were doing. They were setting themselves up as the arbiter of truth, and they were the ones who were accusing you and refusing to repent.

JANET: Yes, and their thing is basically, "If you just repeat this mantra like an automaton, then everything will be good. All we're asking is that you just say these words." And I don't know where they got those words. I never said I wasn't a sinner. That's never been the issue. I've always known that. But I'm not an abuser. And I went to help because there was one in my life only to receive the same treatment from these

pastors that I was going to them for help for in the first place.

NATALIE: Yep, unbelievable. I want to actually read some phrases from this letter that you sent to me if that's okay because there are some things in here that expand on the letter that you just said. One thing they said is, "In light of her," meaning you, "being found contumacious, incorrigible..." I looked up those words. "Contumacious" means stubbornly and willfully disobedient to authority.

JANET: Praise God. In this case, you're absolutely right.

NATALIE: Well, fraudulent authority for sure.

JANET: I want to put it on a T-shirt.

NATALIE: Yeah, seriously. "Incorrigible." That means not able to be corrected, improved, or reformed. Now, I would say that these people are stubbornly and willfully disobedient to God and not able to be corrected, improved, or reformed. These men were. Again, they accused you of the very things that they are guilty of before God. In other words, a victim doesn't have any recourse here to beg for help or to think that she could possibly get help in her abusive situation because if she does, she's going to be viewed as stubborn. If she stubbornly sticks to the truth, then she's incorrigible and contumacious. It's unbelievable.

And then they said, "This action is taken by the congregation," this action of excommunication, "under the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ." That is blasphemy. They just blasphemed the name of Jesus Christ by attributing to Christ, our good Shepherd, their fraudulent... Basically, they're the shepherds that just let the wolves in to devour the sheep, and they're saying that they have the permission and the blessing of Jesus Christ to do that. I had to read that part because it just blows me out of the water.

JANET: Me too. I never stopped being astonished at the lengths that they took to put me in what they think is my place to uphold the spiritual authority that they believe that they have over their people. And I was thinking about this — I've been thinking about it a lot in knowing that I was going to talk to you — and I don't know when it started that I feel like there's this expectation, like we almost expect evangelical pastors to walk with swagger and a chip on their shoulder and to be punchy like these guys, and this is not the gentle and lowly servant that Christ is. And He was not constantly telling people how filthy they were and how sinful. He reserved it for people like these guys.

NATALIE: Right, like the Pharisees.

JANET: They're the ones that Christ called whitewashed tombs full of hypocrisy and wickedness. I have to be okay knowing that I know that.

NATALIE: And God knows that.

JANET: Even though it makes my blood boil to go back and read that everything that they sent me, they signed, "in Christ." It's disgusting.

NATALIE: Yup. They're using the name of Jesus as a cover-up for their sin. When you read this letter, when you read some of the other letters, what was your reaction?

JANET: It kind of feels like you've had your bell rung. It just puts me in a brain fog and still it does when I reread these letters. I get so dumbfounded at this, especially the excommunication one. I had to look up "contumacious" too, and I do wear it as a badge of honor.

NATALIE: Well, because we want to be stubbornly and willfully disobedient when we are told to do certain things by someone who wants us to sin and basically live a lie and tell lies. Jesus was crucified with thieves, but He was crucified as someone who was set up as a fraud, but He was the real thing. And so I'm sure they would have called Jesus Christ "contumacious" as well because He was claiming to be God and willfully disobeying the Pharisees and what they wanted to put Him in His place, and He just would not go into His place.

JANET: There are some things I'm realizing that we do in this Christian walk that are really scary because if you're really on that narrow road, and I kind of lined up just as easily as anybody thinking, "Oh, well, I'll bear the cross and I'll follow Christ and I'll be Christ-like," but when the rubber meets the road, will you really? And that's the point that I got to.

That final letter, there was relief, too, of thinking, "Well, praise the Lord. Finally, maybe I won't hear from them anymore." And I haven't. But what I didn't send you was kind of like the cover part to that letter, which was sent out to the congregation. The whole congregation got that letter too. I ended up getting it because my sixteen-year-old daughter is still on the membership rolls of that church even though she quit attending when I did, and she received the letter. But the intro part of it basically explains to people that if they see me out in public, they are not to talk to me except to restore me to repentance. That's the stuff of Hester Prynne.

And thankfully a lot of people who I've told it to, they're like, "What year do these people think it is? What in the world?" But it's easy to have that reaction, but keep in mind that an entire church of people went along with this or chose to blindly believe these pastors and take their word for it without asking me what the truth was. And quite a few of them knew the truth because I had some very close people in that church, and nobody came to ask me, "What's going on?"

People that were acting like my best friend right up until the time that I quit going there never, ever, ever reached out to find out what was going on. They just, in a blind, cowardly way, choose to take what the pastors say as truth. Or maybe they're afraid that the same thing is going to happen to them. But in that case, I would ask them, "Why stay there? Why in the world do you want to be a part?" However, I don't condemn people for where they are. They might just not know what they don't know. And hopefully, in the future, their eyes will be opened and they will take more of a stand.

NATALIE: Even with this excommunication series, my hope is that people would start to recognize that just because someone is in a spiritual leadership role doesn't mean that they're always honest, doesn't mean that they are wise, doesn't mean that they're emotionally mature or that they have some kind of knowledge or wisdom that you don't have. There are a lot of frauds in those positions and they like those positions because look at the power that they can have. They steal power over other people's lives and then do this kind of destructive behavior. I'm just wondering how their treatment has impacted your life and how you're doing today.

JANET: It was a stressful year because I did go through divorce in April of 2023 — that was final. I also went through cancer, and praise God it was caught early, but this church never said anything about that. So I kind of considered that a blessing, almost, that these things happened at the same time because I couldn't quite fully wallow in the excommunication. By the time that happened, having gone through divorce and cancer, I said, "This is just junior varsity. You people can just talk to the hand because if you think that you guys are the biggest thing that's happened in my life this year, just take a number."

However, that being said, it does hurt. It did hurt. There's public shaming involved. And even though I know that I didn't do wrong, that still hurts and it causes tremendous wounding. You hear people refer to the second wound when you go and share your trauma with somebody and they make it worse. They call that the second wound. Well, I could call this the thirtieth wound because I feel like it was so over the top.

NATALIE: It's traumatic. They're doing profound damage.

JANET: They really are, but I will say that God has given me copious amounts of courage. And I can say that because it has not come from me. And just the ability to not worry about certain things that I know that I would have worried about before. And I'm also in a different place in my journey than other people might've been who go through excommunication. I think that's something else that we have to take into account with anything is that all of our experiences are different. The way we're going to feel about any experience is going to depend on just where we are in life, what we've been through, what we've healed from.

But I just feel like it is so true that you will be ridiculed and outcast for blowing a whistle. And I've learned that and it hurts, but the only one with spiritual authority... Because these guys did tell me in an email that they were my spiritual authority and they didn't like it when I told them that they were not.

NATALIE: Yeah, they pointed themselves, which is kind of funny when you think about it.

JANET: Yes. I thank the Lord that His foundation is one of righteousness and justice, and I have to trust it because He says it. And even if I'm alone, I have to cast my anchor on it. Where I am today — I love the Lord. I recognize that not everybody that's in a church building is a follower of Christ. I know that pastors are human too, and I feel like I'm glad to know that even church leaders who are good and kind and godly, they're still not my spiritual authority. That's too big of a burden to put on them. They're people too. And I've really understood that I can love people where they are and just leave it up to God to fix us all.

And so through everything I've just found that now I'm able to validate people because they're image bearers who matter, and I just really appreciate their stories. I like being curious because I think, I'm just one person and I know all that's happened to me, so there's just so much to each individual. And I don't feel like I have to solve anything. I don't feel like I'm condoning anything that they might do that I disagree with. I'm able to just love them. I'm able to just sit with them. Christ didn't point to the woman caught in adultery and say, "You're a sinner and what you did was wrong." He wasn't afraid to talk to her. He talked to her. He loved her where she was. He wasn't condoning anything that she had done, and there is so much freedom in that.

NATALIE: Yes. I think it takes far more faith and belief in a powerful God, a big, powerful God, when you can say, "I don't have to control this other person's life. I'm going to

commit them to God and I'm just going to show them love. I'm just going to hold space for them. I'm just going to sit with them in their brain."

But that's not the Christianity of this particular church. This particular church's version of Christianity is not faith in a big God. It's basically wringing their hands in panic and feeling that God is not able to do much of anything, and so they're going to take over for Him and force things. And it's so sad. That's why I called my new book *All the Scary Little Gods*. They are worshiping a scary little god and that's why they're scared and full of shame and then putting their fear and shame on the people in their congregation.

JANET: There's a very uptight vibe where it's all about self-preservation, being the coolest and the smartest. They set themselves up on the pedestal where we should be putting Christ, but Christ is gentle and humble, and He would never walk with swagger.

I wanted to say one more thing that's my favorite part of my story, and that is that after all of this — I hate to say it so harshly, but it's the way I felt — I detested pastors. I did not want a thing to do with pastors or people involved in church or even men for that matter. I was tired from the divorce. And lo and behold God, who is just so wonderful and knows just what we need, dropped a man in my lap who I knew from thirty years ago from high school. We had gone on mission trips together and he happens to be a pastor. And he's the pastor of the church where I grew up.

So the nice part of my story is that because I'm dating him now, because he is a pastor, he does live an hour away. So it's not convenient for me to go to this church now regularly, but I've been able to slowly ease my way back in. And it is a wonderful, wonderful church of people who accept men and women and just everybody where they are, how they are. They're not looking for you to be anybody in particular. They have just accepted me where I am. And so God brought me a humble, gentle, quiet, kind man who is a grownup and who's wonderful, but he's also a pastor.

NATALIE: That just gives me chills. I cannot believe the redemptive power and love and care of God towards us.

JANET: I can't either.

NATALIE: It's so interesting how He can take the worst points of pain and redeem those things and bring beauty out of them.

JANET: Yes, I love the story. I'm saying to him all the time, "I love our story." I love the God in this.

NATALIE: I love your story too. Wow. So the last question I was going to ask you — but maybe that was part of it — but if you had one message to offer to Christians who say they love and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, what would it be?

JANET: Most definitely do not be like those pastors. Don't be like wolves. I don't even call them pastors because Jesus has shown us what is good, and that's to act justly and to love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Not swagger, not with power or patriarchy or punchiness or being theologically smarter than everyone or straining a gnat and swallowing a camel.

I feel like we need to humbly, please, humbly walk with God, allowing the Holy Spirit to fix people and to be the one who works. Even if we don't know what it looks like, if we just seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, let Him tell us what that is. I will choose this day that Christ is who I'm going to follow. And now I know enough to know what He looks like and what He doesn't.

NATALIE: Amen.