

## IF I LEAVE MY ABUSIVE MARRIAGE AM I GIVING UP ON THE POWER OF GOD TO CHANGE MY HUSBAND?

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [FlyingFreeNow.com](http://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 27 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we have three excellent questions from women, and they are all around the theme, "Should I stay or should I go?" There is so much to talk about, so let's dig in.

CALLER 1: What advice would you give to women who choose to stay with their abusers as far as how to pray for them and intercede for them to be released from what I believe is a stronghold that abusers are under from the enemy? I understand it's up to them to choose to receive God's freedom from the enemy and from the strongholds that they are living in. That's my current situation. I'm in my fourth abusive marriage. Sometimes I think this is where God has called me, and then other times I think this is what He's been trying to release me from all these years. I would ask what advice you would give for women who choose to stay to intercede for their husband?

NATALIE: Okay, Rachel, hi.

RACHEL: Hey.

NATALIE: I can relate to what this woman is talking about. I spent years praying for mine. What about you?

RACHEL: Yeah. I think the thing we have in common, you and I, this woman, and many others, is this feeling of responsibility for our husbands as though the only thing that is going to help them to change is if we stay, if we pray, and if we intercede for them. If we do that hard enough, then maybe someday they will have a soft heart, maybe they will change their ways of blaming and accusing that is so characteristic of emotional abuse, or maybe they will be the person that you know that God can have them to be, that God designed them to be.

It is such a trick because we genuinely love these men, we want the best for them, and we want to help them be the best. That is one of the most difficult things to untangle from when you awaken to what is really going on with your marriage, because you have spent the entire time being responsible for them and trying to, as you say, Natalie, be the "Wind beneath their wings and help lift them up," as I think Christian wives are

encouraged to do. There's nothing wrong with that in a healthy relationship. But when there is an abusive power dynamic going on, what happens is that willingness to give, to pray, to be soft towards them, and to work to encourage them in the ways you perceive that they need, they take advantage of it.

That is one of the most gruesome things about this whole dynamic of abuse. The woman or person who is being abused has good intentions and only good love. Meanwhile, the abuser is taking advantage of it, using it against her, and using it to control her. It is horrid! Waking up to that is scary, and it almost feels too big to wrap your mind around. Then to know what to do from there is where we are at right now. "My gosh, how can I stop doing this?" That's what you have to do. You must utterly change your mindset about who you are responsible for – and that is yourself. That's why boundaries are such an important thing to learn, because this whole exercise in an abusive marriage is a display of a lack of boundaries.

Learning how to be responsible for yourself and how to allow your husband to be responsible for himself is really hard. It's painful! It is painful to allow your husband to take responsibility for himself because it feels mean. It feels like you are the worst person ever and that you don't love him. That's not the truth, but that's what it feels like. You have to grieve that you can't be responsible for him anymore. You can't keep this whole thing together anymore because you are called to be responsible for yourself and take care of the responsibilities that God has given you, which is not being his conscience or taking up for him in the ways he is called to take up for himself.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think when we talk about praying for our husbands, it is one of the ways we think can control something that is completely out of our power. We think, "Well, I can't change him, but maybe God can." The thing we must remember is that God also has really good boundaries, and He doesn't force Himself on anybody.

RACHEL: He doesn't! This is where (Natalie, I don't want to go off on a rant on theology, but I am just going to say) certain types of theology make it more difficult to come to the fact that God is not going to break into your husband's will and make him do the things that you are praying about. It is up to your husband to make the choices to allow God to heal him, because walking with God is all about surrender. It's all about yielding to the Holy Spirit, to Jesus, and to allowing that truth to work inside your heart.

But that is the very opposite of what narcissistic abusers do. They can't yield to anything! They don't. It's the very pathology of that mindset. That makes it very difficult for them to have authentic relationships. I don't want to overgeneralize because that's not a good thing to do, but I think it's very hard for them to experience the

transformation that comes from the Holy Spirit, because everything about them prevents them from that yielding or surrender to Jesus. God is not going to do that. If the heart is hardened, He is not going to break in and suddenly start controlling your husband like a puppet master. I don't believe that is who God is.

NATALIE: Right. I think as women of faith we tend to spiritualize a lot of the problems that we have. I don't know why we do that. I feel like that was bred inside of me growing up in a Christian home, that everything was spiritualized. That sounds really wonderful. That sounds biblical and godly, but it's actually not. It's a form of denial and a way of escaping reality.

It's interesting that you used the word "surrender," because I have that word underlined and circled in my notebook right now, except I was thinking in terms of our surrendering to God and our surrendering to reality. Our responsibility is to say, "I don't have control over this situation. I don't have control over this human being. My praying about it is not going to fix the problem, so I need to surrender to the reality of what is going on here." Which in this case is that she's in her fourth abusive marriage, and she needs to make her own...

When we make choices in life, that is not us wresting power away from God. That's impossible to do. Making choices in our life is taking responsibility for the life that God gave to us. God gave us autonomy. He gave us choice. He gave us free-will. Then He says to us, "Now, take responsibility. Take dominion over your life and do what you are called to do." Then we are responsible for us, what we are called to do.

I would say to this woman, if you believe with all your heart, 100%, that God has called you to help abusive men, then that is your choice. But then you must take ownership of that choice. This choice wasn't put upon you by God, but it was a choice that you made. This was your heart's desire to do this. You wanted to be a rescuer and you wanted to do this.

One of the reasons we don't like this idea of choice is because then we are responsible for the outcomes of those choices. We don't like that part. Nobody likes that. That's one of the reasons our abusers put all the responsibility on us, because they don't want the responsibility for the outcome. They want to be able to blame everybody else.

But the really important thing to remember about growing up into maturity, adulthood, and maturity in Christ is that we take responsibility for us and our choices and we let go of everybody and everything else. We can love people, but loving them means that we don't control them and we don't try to make them make good choices. We don't do

that. We make good choices, and we let others make the choices that they choose to make.

RACHEL: Because we are only human beings, we aren't called to be God. We can't be God. That's not who we are. If you think about it, the idea that if we just try hard enough then we could somehow control someone else in order to get them to do the outcome that we desire, that is sort of thinking that we have the power that God has. We just don't. We are finite. He is sovereign and He is bigger than all of this. He doesn't expect or want you to play that role. You are you. Be who He designed you to be.

NATALIE: There are two other things I wanted to bring out about this question. One is the idea of praying. The only thing I would say there is that we are called to intercede for one another, but that doesn't mean we have to be married to the people we are interceding for. Definitely pray for your husband, but you can also pray for that man without exposing yourself to a toxic environment that is destroying your own soul.

For example, one of the ways you can see this is having more of a bird's eye view. Pretend you are looking at a different couple. Pretend you are looking at your daughter or your niece or some other young woman that you love and her marriage. What would you be telling her? Would you say, "You know what, what you need to do is stay and pray and that will solve all of your problems," or "That will make you feel better about your life," or "That will be your calling in life - to stay and pray." If you were praying for her, what kinds of things would you be praying on her behalf? How would you be interceding for her? "Lord, help her be able to endure abuse"? What would you be praying for her?

I know what I would be praying. I'd be praying that she would be rescued, that she would make good decisions for her life, and that she would get out. So what about you? You can pray for that man, but what about your life? What about the daughter of God that you are? Just think about that. Also, because you mentioned that this is your fourth marriage to an abusive man... I remember watching... Have you ever seen that musical, "The Phantom of the Opera"? Have you seen that, Rachel?

RACHEL: Yes.

NATALIE: Okay, I remember watching that. I saw the movie version. It's really good. It's really creepy. I remember thinking that I felt like she did. I wanted to rescue that guy living underneath the opera house. He was an abuser. He was abusive. But I thought, "What if she could rescue him?" If I was in her shoes, I would be very tempted to think that I could rescue him and bring him out into the light. But then you see as the show

goes on that he isn't interested in that. He wants to bring her down into the darkness. There is no way on God's green earth that she would ever have the power to bring him up into the light.

That movie had a happy ending, but my point is that a lot of us women, especially women of faith, tend to think, "With God on my side, I can bring this man up out of the darkness into the light. If I could just do that, that would make my life worthwhile. That would make me valuable in the eyes of God. It would make me valuable in my own eyes. It would make me valuable in the eyes of this other person. My life would have worth if I could accomplish this."

RACHEL: And isn't it romantic?

NATALIE: It is! It is this idealized romantic idea, and it's all a bunch of hogwash!

RACHEL: Yep. It is.

NATALIE: So anyway, I would tell this woman and anyone else, "You don't even have to be married to the person," because some of us dated guys who weren't healthy. It seems like we were just attracted to the bad boys.

RACHEL: Exactly!

NATALIE: I want to help them. I watched my daughter go through this. She was attracted to a bad boy last year. Thank goodness she is out, and now she is with a good boy. I was scared to death of what was going to happen to her, but she thought she could help this guy. But you can't do that. We should move on to the next question unless you have anything else to add?

RACHEL: I think it's sad, because I know in my journey I've come to realize how much my childhood set me up for being attracted to people who were completely unavailable to me. People who were kind were not attractive to me. I felt like they were wimpy. There's that arrogance or confidence that comes with narcissism that they are the only ones who are right. It's sad because it's the case for a lot of women that their childhoods set them up. They make choices based on that.

NATALIE: Christianity, or faith, plays into that as well. Women are supposed to be the rescuers, the homemakers, and enable these men to be all that they were created to be. That's not the truth.

RACHEL: It's not the dynamic that God established.

NATALIE: Right. Okay, let's listen to the second question now.

CALLER 2: Hi there. My question has to do with the decision of staying in a marriage or leaving if your spouse has realized that the ways he has been treating you have been emotionally and mentally abusive. My husband has said time and time again that he realizes that what he has been doing is abusive, and I believe that he wants to change. I've seen some changes in his behavior. I think some of the patterns are still there, but I think that he sincerely wants to be different. He's even gone to counseling and that sort of thing.

But I feel that my heart is so hurt and wounded that I don't know that I can picture myself being vulnerable with him again. It's really scary to think about being vulnerable with him, so then I think, "Well, if I leave now, I'll never know." But also I'm in so much pain, and I guess I'm confused because his desire is to change, but I am just so hurt. Thanks.

NATALIE: Okay, I definitely remember going through this and feeling like this. I had separated from my now ex, and he was making some efforts. We had already been through this cycle in the past where I had gotten help and he had made some effort, but then he backslid again. This was an ongoing cycle in our relationship. By the time it came down to the separation where we were physically separated, I was not looking anymore for half-assed efforts. I was looking for heart change.

Here's the thing I realized. Anybody can change their behavior temporarily. If we want something bad enough, we can go through behavioral changes. But if it's not rooted in genuine heart change, then it's not going to last. I think there are ways you can tell if this is genuine heart change.

Rachel, think about people you know who are people of integrity. My husband now, he is a man of integrity. He is who he is. You are dating a man who is who he is. There are just really solid men. They have integrity. They are not going to lie to you. They are not going to try to pull the wool over your head. If you ask them a question, they are going to give you the whole answer and not withhold information to try to manipulate you or try to yank your chain. They're not going to push your buttons on purpose to see you cry or freak out. They would never even dream of doing those things, let alone do them. They are men of integrity. Like, if you had a piece of gold, they are solid gold all the way through rather than being a chunk of coal with a gold veneer on the outside.

RACHEL: Right. Or fool's gold. Exactly right.

NATALIE: Yes, exactly! I've got some ideas, but I'll see if you have some too, Rachel, as far as what you would do to be able to really tell if this is going to move in a good direction eventually.

RACHEL: A couple of things. First, you said he's going to counseling, and that's fine. That's good. I wouldn't let that be the end-all-be-all, because anyone could go to a couple of counseling sessions and act like they are really putting their effort into it. So what is he doing outside the counseling sessions in order to implement what he's learned in his own life? Not using that to control you or to put burdens on you or make accusations of you, but is he focused and zeroed in on himself? If he's so aware of what he's doing and how much that affects you, what is he doing about it? Is he really zeroed in on trying to make some changes on a moment-to-moment basis, or is he sort of maybe half-heartedly doing a few things, but like you said, the patterns are still there?

I think that someone who knows that their wife has experienced an excruciating amount of pain at their behest – caused by them – that they are going to be overwhelmed with grief, and that grief is going to propel them to really do a deep dive within themselves and do whatever it takes to not act like that anymore because they love their wife and they don't want to be like this. Nothing else matters except fixing this.

The way you can also tell that is over time. Is he being consistent about his behavior changes and being zeroed in on himself? Or is he doing it a little bit here and a little bit there, but everything else is pretty much the same? I think the trick for us is that we are so used to being thankful for just the slightest thing, lavishing on our gratitude because they did just one tiny little thing. It's hard because then, if we expect more, if we set this expectation that he is going to be zeroed in on himself, we feel bad because he's done this one thing. "What do you want? What do you expect? You're just so demanding." We can even accuse ourselves of that.

We have a very compassionate, empathetic spirit – all of us do. I feel comfortable saying that. That works against us because we say, "Well, he did a little bit, so maybe I will have sex with him tonight. Or maybe I don't need to stay in the guest bedroom anymore." Keep those boundaries and keep those expectations high. The expectations must be the inverse of the depths of your pain. (I can tell you are in a lot of pain, and that's what you said.) He needs to be putting in the inverse amount of effort in order to heal himself.

It's not just, "I throw you a few bones and we go on our way." It's, "Oh my gosh, I have caused my wife this unbelievable amount of pain and sorrow in our marriage, and I am going to make a commensurate amount of effort in order to deal with this so it doesn't happen again." Do not accept crumbs! That is a trap, and all it means is that they're not really doing the work and they're not going to be able to change over the long term.

NATALIE: That's right. I would say, too, that you may need to make yourself vulnerable – in other words, expose yourself to the potential of realizing the truth – by making sure that you are giving him feedback, by making sure that you are not tiptoeing around issues in order to avoid an abusive incident or to avoid him criticizing you. One of the ways that I knew, because mine was extremely covert and he had everyone believing that he was changing, was on the back end he kept saying one thing that was my clue that nothing was really changing. He would always say, "Well, you do things too."

RACHEL: Accusation.

NATALIE: Yeah. He could not get past that. "Well, you do things too." That's what made me realize he had no idea. He's equating his abuse of me with my... For example, I didn't do the things he did first, but secondly, what he was upset with me about was when I called him out on things. He hated that! To him, that was abusive. I was abusing him when I said, "Please don't do that," or "What you just did was not appropriate. We don't talk to people like that." When I called him out, he would get angry. I was being a meanie and disrespectful just for being an adult.

Yes, when we had altercations that were bad, there were times when I went bat-you-know-what crazy and I yelled and swore. Then, of course, I was an abuser for yelling and swearing. I wasn't saying anything abusive to him, but I would yell about the situation. I would say, "Why aren't you listening?" that kind of thing. "Why don't you take responsibility? I don't understand why you are lying to me. I know you're lying to me. You're not owning up to what you did." That's what I mean by yelling. I wasn't saying, "You blankety blank blank." That's not how I operate.

So when you confront them and give them feedback about their behavior, you are risking them coming back at you and saying horrible things to you, either blaming you for it, telling you lies about what they did or didn't do, and that really hurts. But that's the only way that you are going to know that he has really changed, if you confront and keep pressing. I've talked to other women, over and over again actually, who really believe that their husband has changed. And usually within three months they are back again saying, "No, I guess he hasn't."



RACHEL: That's really sad.

NATALIE: Yeah, it's really sad. They just keep continuously going around in circles with these men. Believe me, here's the other thing I would say. If they've genuinely changed, your socks are going to be knocked right off your feet. It is going to be so obvious to you because it is going to be so absolutely, miraculously obvious to you. So if you're not feeling that, then trust your gut. Your gut knows exactly what is going on. You might not, because you've got this whole wishful thinking going on. It's really hard to get out of that mode of denial, but your body knows exactly what's going on because your body is picking up... You are brain mapping him.

Again, I've brought this book up before, but I recommend the book "Brain Talk" by Dr. David Schnark. But you are brain mapping him unconsciously all the time. Your body knows what's real before your conscious mind does, so go with your gut there.

Another thing I want to say, and this is a theme through this whole podcast episode 27, is that you get to make a choice. God is not up there with this big hammer saying, "Okay, better make the right choice or I'm going to squash you." That's not how God works. That's not our Savior. He says, "You're an adult woman. You are mature. You can make a choice. You must decide for your own life what is best. You have to decide what is going to nurture and nourish the child that I created when I created you."

Because at the end of the day, you are the only one that you are responsible for before God. You are not going to stand before God one day and have Him say, "So, let me know how things went with so-and-so's life. How did the decisions you made affect their life?" No! He is going to say, "How did you steward your own life? How did you make decisions..."? Actually, I don't know what He's going to say. That's maybe another story we tell ourselves. But anyway, I do know that there's a principle of taking responsibility for our own lives and that we are not responsible for other people's lives. Is there anything you'd like to add before we go on to the third question, Rachel?

RACHEL: Yeah. I want to share my heart with her, because I can tell that she is really wanting to do the right thing. I think that's true for all these women. They just want to do the right thing. It's so confusing to know which way is up. I just want to encourage you, as much as you should be looking for your husband to zero in on himself, to zero in on yourself and Jesus. Keep looking up to Him and focus on caring for and stewarding yourself, your own boundaries, and your relationship with God.

That's such a simple thing, but it's really important for women like us to be validated in that way and have permission, because we are told to just keep sacrificing and

sacrificing and that whatever we've done is not enough. Actually, you have enough. You've done enough. You are enough. Just be and just rest. Easier said than done.

NATALIE: Yes, that is really good. Let's listen to our last question.

CALLER 3: Hello, Natalie and Rachel. Thank you both for speaking so much truth into the lives of so many women that are blessed by your podcast and by your articles, Natalie. My question is that I have been married for five years. This year is when I really started to confront the confusing issues and have been able to admit to myself about the emotional and spiritual abuse that started while we were dating and engaged and has carried on into marriage. The signs have been there – being confused and everything.

But now that I am five years in, I listen to your podcast and I think, "Wow. You both lasted so long in your marriages and went through so much before the Lord helped you stand up for yourselves and do what was best for you and your family, you and your kids. I've not been married as long." We just celebrated our five year anniversary. I'm seeing the signs, and we actually are separated now. I'm not necessarily looking for reconciliation. I'm pretty certain that this man and I are in an unhealthy relationship. So I guess my question is, is it too soon? Ultimately, I need to bring that before the Lord and have Him answer me, but can you speak to people who are in young marriages but are seeing the signs now, and what would you say to those people? Thank you.

NATALIE: Okay, I want to jump on this and say that my hope and prayer is that this issue would become so in the forefront of our minds that women would get out of their marriages as soon as they realize this is an abusive marriage. If you realize that one month in, you file for divorce as soon as possible, especially if you can get out before you have kids. The longer that you wait, the more complicated it gets, the more other people get involved...

For this woman, yes, you can get a divorce even though you've only been married for five years. I had nine kids, so for my twenty-five years of marriage, they are the beautiful thing that came out of those twenty-five years. But with my kids, my daughter... If my daughter was going to live my life over again, I would tell her right in that first year... Because six months into my marriage, I felt this horrible pit in my stomach that I had a lifetime ahead of me that was not looking really good or real hopeful. I would tell my daughter if she was in the same shoes, "Get out now! Get out and run as far and as fast as you can."

Here's the thing. These people don't change. Again, it's your choice. If you do decide to

stay, just know what you are staying for. Know what you are buying into. You are buying into a life of abuse, and if that is what you want to do, you get to choose that. It is your choice, and Jesus will be with you through it. But if you decide, "That's not the life for me," you get to choose to get out.

When I did get out, I started a new life. I have an amazing marriage. I'm experiencing a Christian marriage for the first time in my life – a real, authentic Christian marriage. It is beautiful, and it is modeling something for my kids that they never had before. The peace in my life, my parenting, and all aspects of my life have been completely transformed since I got out from living in poison. Whether I had stayed single or married, my life was turning a corner and becoming far more beautiful once I got out. Was it hell to get out? Yes. But the other side of that hell has a lot of potential for amazing things to happen.

RACHEL: I'm so happy for her that she woke up so early. We knew that there was something wrong, but I didn't have words for it. I was so ashamed that my husband treated me this way I couldn't even reach out for help. I was just trying to get through day by day. I got married when I was eighteen and divorced at thirty-three. I spent the entirety of my twenties trying to make this thing work while I was raising our son. This is the way it is. God was there, and I'm okay with it. I'm just happy for her that she knows it and she was able to reach out, educate herself, and come to the realization of what is going on. What you do about it now is up to you. I know that you are going to make the right decision. I guess it's weird to say, but congratulations!

NATALIE: I agree. I echo that.

RACHEL: Keep educating yourself. I think the core of this question is, "Is it okay for me to think that this is the way it's going to be without having done my time or put in a whole bunch of years and whatever else?" It is. You've seen it. You can see it consistently. Five years is a long time. If there are no signs of godly repentance, then I think you've come to the truth, and what you do with that is up to you.

NATALIE: Yes. Thank you for joining us for this podcast episode. If you could do us a favor and leave a review on Apple Podcasts... Leave a five-star rating if you think this is worth five stars. It's even better if you could possibly leave some words that would describe what you think about this podcast and how it's changed your life. That will help other people who are looking for podcasts like this to find us. That's what we want. We want the women who need to find us to find us so they can get the help that they need. That's it. Fly free!