

HOLY GHOSTED: SPIRITUAL ANXIETY AND RELIGIOUS TRAUMA

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 271 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we have one of my favorite people, Dr. Tiffany Yecke Brooks. Some of you may remember Tiffany because I interviewed her in the spring of 2022 about her newly released book at that time, which is called *Gaslighted by God: Reconstructing a Disillusioned Faith*. And our Flying Higher group of about 250 Christian women went through that book last year together and Tiffany joined us for a fascinating Q&A.

Tiffany is the lead or contributing writer on more than two dozen books including multiple New York Times bestsellers, and she's back with us because she has another book that has just come out, and it has got such a fabulous title. It's called *Holy Ghosted: Spiritual Anxiety, Religious Trauma, and the Language of Abuse*. Incredible. I think that we are in for an amazing conversation. Welcome back, Tiffany.

TIFFANY: Thank you so much for having me. I really appreciate it.

NATALIE: I just want to say that your book is like the descriptive analysis of everything that's brewing behind the scenes in my own book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, which is my story that illustrates exactly what your book explains and analyzes. They're kind of like sister books in some ways. And your book is about equipping the saints, as you pointed out in one of your chapters, and I'm going to read this little quote: "Christians who are fed up with manipulative malarkey and Machiavellian mind games in the name of Christ." And I love that so much. I just had to put that out there. So I love your way with words.

I was going to mention this at the end of the podcast, but I'm going to say it now. Tiffany writes articles on Substack and she writes once a month. You know how some people will put out lots and lots of blog posts, they just churn them out they're not all that great? I mean, how great can you write a blog post if you're just slapping it out in ten minutes? Not Tiffany. She writes once a month and they are huge little bombs of amazingness. So we will put a link in the show notes to her Substack so you can follow her. She's really funny, so if you like to laugh and if you like the kinds of topics that we're going to talk about today, you will love her Substack.

Okay, so we're going to dive in now and talk about the things that you expose in your book and how our exposure to those things is going to equip us with discernment and wisdom as we live out our Christianity in the world. So why don't we start by telling us,

especially for people who maybe haven't heard your last interview with us, tell us why you, as a literature and writing professor, are addressing this topic? You're kind of expounding, really, on what you wrote about in your first book.

TIFFANY: Yes. What I loved was a friend of mine in the UK actually said, "I feel like Gaslighted by God was you took all the eggs and you broke them." And she said, "And this book is now showing us, we're going to make an omelet. Now we're seeing what we're going to do with those eggs." And I just thought that was such a fun little metaphor that she did. So yes, we're making the omelet.

As I point out in the book, I'm not a psychologist. I can't diagnose anybody with anything. I'm very clear about that. But I am a literature and writing professor, which means I specialize in language. I'm a word person. And what I found in looking at this topic of spiritual anxiety stemming from religious abuse was that so much of it is rooted in manipulative language and the way we communicate through certain techniques that warp a person's worldview or shape their lens so that they believe that's the only reality or that we twist logic in such a way that somebody might look at that, have that cognitive dissonance of like, "I feel like something's wrong here, but I can't put my finger on it because the way you explained it seems to make so much sense. And so I guess this must be true, and I'll just disregard this part of myself that's screaming and waving every red flag in existence because you've told me I shouldn't question," or "A good Christian woman just goes along because maybe I don't understand this well enough."

And so as a language person, as a word person, I want to harness the power of language to call attention to damaging behaviors and beliefs. And so academically, I study the way that humans create meaning through texts and speech and how rhetoric shapes the way that we transmit and receive meaning and messages. And so that is the lens that I took approaching this topic of saying how does the language work? What is actually occurring here when this technique is used? And how does that then result in the anxiety, the fear, the extracted obedience, the manipulation? How does that work? It's looking behind the curtain. If you can get to what's underneath the language to what's happening there, you can better understand when these techniques are being used to manipulate you.

NATALIE: Yes. I love that because, in our circles, we see a lot of posts on Facebook and things that talk about strategies or tactics of an abuser or an abusive system, but understanding why those tactics are working on us, that's what you're saying I think.

TIFFANY: Yes, exactly. And so I try to say, "Well, let's actually go through scripture. Let's

look at clobber verses. Let's look at stories that tend to always be presented a certain way and see what's actually at work here. Does it say what we're being told it said? Do we need to lift that lens and view it through a different one to realize that maybe what we've been given and told is reality is not actual reality?"

NATALIE: Yeah, that's beautiful. If I hadn't read the book, that alone right there would make me want to get the book, just saying. Your book is really about spiritual anxiety. Why don't you tell us what that is or how you would describe that or define it and what does that look like in real life?

TIFFANY: Okay, so I think it's important to start by explaining what spiritual anxiety is not. It is not healthy religious devotion. It is not normal feelings of regret or repentance or a desire to do right. It is not mental illness or a brain health imbalance, and we'll get to that later. And it is not an attempt to erase or deny the reality of sin or its consequences.

And I want to throw that out there right at the beginning because so many people sometimes will say in talking about this, "Well, you are just trying to excuse faith or excuse sin, or you're just doing this because you want to justify whatever it is," or "Well, that's what religious devotion looks like." No, this is not what healthy religious devotion looks like.

But — and I'm writing this book from the perspective of somebody who dealt with spiritual anxiety for most of their life — unless you have someone to tell you that's not normal, you don't know that's not normal because your experience is the basis of your reality. And so for years, I had no idea that nobody — not nobody else — but that the people around me, it's like, "How come they don't look spiritually exhausted all the time? How come they're not constantly scared about these things?" And I was like, "Well, they just handle it better, which means something's wrong with me. And so I just need to double down and do better," which just makes the anxiety worse.

And so that's the opening caveat. That is not what spiritual anxiety is. What it is is things like obsessive, obsessive fears of angering God through either intentional or unintentional sin. This is where God almost becomes like that fairytale genie or the trickster of like, "Uh, uh, uh — here's the loophole and you missed it," so that idea. Deep doubts about your own worthiness of God's attention or care or love. Constant feelings of being a failure of living a Christ-centered life, like, "I'm a terrible Christian. Oh my gosh, I didn't do my best on that, I didn't achieve perfection, I didn't do enough."

Faith responses that are shaped by or rooted in unhealthy thought patterns. And I think

that's really important to think about more. Persistent concern about being rejected by or losing your community or identity, and I know that's something you have written about and spoken about, and that's a huge technique that's used to sort of control and manipulate behavior.

And then incessant stress about feeling out of step or alienated from your faith tradition or your religious body. And this can present in a variety of ways. It can be like unwelcome, intrusive religious thoughts, pervasive doubt about your own salvation, terror of God, perfectionism is a big one, extreme legalism or spiritual literalism, compulsive praying, oftentimes. We hear, "Well, Paul said, 'Pray without ceasing,' and so if I ceased, I have sinned. So I need to constantly have that running in the background until it interferes with the ability to lead a normal life."

Compulsive actions or rituals or superstitions. That's a big one, where we allow our religion to slip into... It's no longer faith, it's now superstition of, "Well, I have to perform this ritual, I have to say these words, I have to pray this prayer, I have to do this thing, in order to set the pins up for everything to go right."

A fear of speaking honestly, even extreme indecisiveness, and that's a big thing I talk about too is the ability to make a decision can be so difficult because a number of churches practice the terrible method or philosophy of shaming the intuition out of people. And so it's like, "No, no, no, you can't" — I've heard so many radio preachers say this — "You can't trust your feelings. Don't trust emotions. Emotions lie to you. You have to do what scripture says." Scripture was not written to speak to every single eventuality that's ever going to play out.

And it's a real problem if we look at a text written in an ancient context and try to apply that to a 21st-century situation and call that integrity. Because people will say, "Well, you're reading that out of context and you have to realize this is written in an ancient context." Okay. But you're taking something from an ancient context, or let's say you're putting 21st-century values on an ancient text. Okay. You're taking 500 BC values and imposing them on the 21st century. It works both ways.

And again, things like deep-seated fears of fear of rejection and that sort of thing. And the response to this kind of anxiety: You can have depression, despair, withdrawal from community, spiritual burnout or spiritual immobility where you just feel like you can't do anything. Again, that struggle with making decisions of, "Well, I have to wait until the Lord tells me exactly what to do, and I don't know, so I'm just going to stay in this situation," and maybe that's not the best choice. Or almost this manic recitation of prayers or performing rituals, fanatically evangelizing sometimes. We go out and try to

do and do and do.

Desperate people take desperate measures. And when a person is in this mindset, when they've been trapped in this mindset of spiritual anxiety because that is what the community around them has fed them, that's what they've been told a spiritual life is, then they are going to do whatever they can to try to hold on to that, to try to do better. That makes them feel desperate. "Okay, then something isn't working because I am not doing enough. So I need to go out and do more and be more literal and be more self-sacrificing." And all that does is perpetuate the cycle.

NATALIE: Yeah. You are describing my life.

TIFFANY: And I want to add that a lot of masking goes on and that you might feel this yourself, but it's hard to detect it in other people because a lot of people with spiritual anxiety are really good at masking that and not showing any obvious outward signs.

NATALIE: Because that would be bad too.

TIFFANY: Exactly, because then we're not showing that we've got the "Joy, joy, joy, joy down in our hearts. Where? Down in our hearts." And then that becomes more isolating because you now are not living authentically, and then you're like, "Well, do I really believe...?" And again, it goes back to that cognitive dissonance, and then you're living a lie and then lies perpetuate lies. And then you end up self convicting and that's where the anxiety comes from.

NATALIE: Yes, wow. So many people that I work with have grown up with this. You say in your book that the spiritual anxiety is actually a trauma response. So I want you to talk about that a little bit because that's something that I would have never realized until recent years. If you would have talked to me twenty years ago and said, "Yeah, you've got some trauma," I would have been like, "What are you talking about? I grew up in an amazing Christian family, amazing Christian churches," and I would have not known what you were talking about. And yet what you just described, that was my internal life just roiling around inside of me. So tell us what that trauma response is and maybe where it comes from.

TIFFANY: Yeah, absolutely. So trauma responses happen when the brain determines that something about its environment feels dangerous or threatening and then it adapts accordingly. So it's, again, going back to that fight, flight, fawn, or freeze reaction. And this is great. This keeps us alive. Like that snake with the shaky tail has poison or when these berries smell like mold, maybe don't eat them, or maybe don't

walk so close to the cliff. This is designed to keep us alive, and that's great. Or when the big hairy thing with claws and pointy teeth comes running at us, run away.

But we are not designed to live in that stress response at all times. So that's where trauma responses come out, is that the brain is in a situation where it constantly feels threatened or under extreme amounts of stress so that what was only supposed to ever be a temporary response to keep you alive and survive this situation, this tiger chasing you or whatever, has now become your status quo. And this is now where you exist at all times, and this has become kind of your baseline for reality.

And so in religious environments, what that means is that if you are constantly in an environment of fear, if you are constantly receiving messages of, "If you do this you are selfish, and selfishness means a sin and you will spend eternity in hell," if that is your just standard mode of existence, then your brain is adapting to respond in this high-stress way at all times.

Spiritual anxiety doesn't happen in a vacuum. So people don't fear rejection for non-compliance unless they believe that rejection for non-compliance is a possibility. And the only way they can learn that is either to have been taught that, to be told that, or to have seen it played out. So nobody wakes up one morning just suddenly afraid that God's going to condemn their soul to an infinite hell unless they've been taught there's a God, that God has the authority to pass judgment on human souls, they have a soul... All this so far, this makes sense, but they have the power to win God's approval or rejection with that soul, and those who don't win God's favor are discarded on an eternal level.

And we play that out in a microcosm in our church. And so when that is a learned behavior and the brain adapts accordingly to, "This is my reality now. This is the level at which I'm always going to operate," learned behaviors have to be learned. And so this is where that idea of what we were talking about where spiritual anxiety and mental health sort of overlap. Because spiritual anxiety may be enhanced with clinically recognized conditions — I talk about obsessive-compulsive disorder personally in the book, that certain things — neurodivergence, generalized anxiety, depression, whatever — these things can absolutely inform and influence and heighten spiritual anxiety, but spiritual anxiety is a result of external conditions, not neurological wiring.

And I think that's a really important thing for people to realize because that means it's not your fault. This was something that was imposed upon you. And so it doesn't mean you are broken. Mental health does not mean you are broken either — I want to be very clear about that. But just the idea of... Because self-blame is such a big part of

spiritual anxiety of, "I'm not good enough, I'm not doing enough, my heart is evil, God is disappointed in me" — no. This is what was put on you. And so it's really important to me that people realize that spiritual anxiety is not a result of neurological wiring, that the factors that spark it have to have been taught, modeled, and reinforced.

NATALIE: Yeah. I just want to jump in here and say that I love that you brought up the idea of it being modeled too because when I think about the things that I was taught, a lot of the things I was taught growing up weren't actually explicitly taught. In fact, some things I was taught the opposite of verbally, but then what I observed was the exact opposite.

So we observe what happens when people don't comply. We observe people gossiping and talking about how, "Oh my word, did you see that woman, what she did?" And then you're like, "Oh, make sure never to do that." It's those messages that are programmed into us from the time that we're little, because children just are watching.

And even as adults, we go into an environment, into a group, into a church, or wherever we are, and we start picking up what's acceptable here and what's not acceptable here. And we all want to be accepted. We all want to be loved and seen. So we're going to alter our behavior to make sure that we're complying with the rules of wherever we're at.

TIFFANY: Absolutely. I want to plug your book right now, Natalie, because that's one of the things that I think you do so beautifully in it when you narrate sections from the child's point of view. And there's the innocence that you bring into, "Well, I was taught this but I'm seeing this, and I don't understand how to reconcile the two." And I think you capture that so beautifully. And the reader can see where the struggle and the anxiety comes from that because you are kept in this constant state of, "What is true, what's real?"

NATALIE: Yes. Okay, one of your first chapters is about something you call... And when I picked questions, I don't think I told you I was going to do this one.

TIFFANY: It's all good.

NATALIE: It talks about something that you call "involuntary internalized legalism." Is this kind of what you're talking about right now?

TIFFANY: Absolutely. So this is a phrase that I coined for the book. And I say that — I'm like, "Look, this isn't medically recognized anywhere, but to introduce to the readers the

lexicon of the book, this is something that I'm going to be talking about."

It's really closely related to, I think, the idea some people may be familiar with, scrupulosity. And the Catholic church has a whole range of study on that. And I just want to say there's a wonderful book by a priest named Thomas Santa. I think it's just called "Scrupulosity," and I'm big proponent of that book. I recommend reading that if people struggle with this.

But ILL, or involuntary internalized legalism, is a little bit broader than that. And it's this idea of, so first of all, legalism can be imposed either outwardly of, "I am putting these extra pressures, extra requirements, whatever, on you." But legalism can also be applied internally.

So a woman — I wrote about her in "Gaslighted," and that's kind of what got me thinking about this — where she believed that, "Well, if people get divorced, then the Bible says they're allowed to remarry under these circumstances, and that's okay. But I know if I were ever divorced, I would never remarry because I would always stay true to that first covenant." She was like, "I put this on myself." She said, "And then I woke up in the middle of the night and realized" — just one night going through her divorce from her seminarian husband — and she said God just put on her heart this message where He said, "If you lived in Bible times, he would have been stoned for what he did according to the Bible. So you are now under the widow's protection." "And it was so revealing to me," she said, "but it was interesting because I had put this extra restriction on myself because I was just going to be that much better for God."

And so I think that's a powerful way to think about this idea because legalism can function in one of two ways. Either it's sort of the slippery slope logical fallacy of, "Well, if A leads to B and B leads to C and C leads to D and so on and so forth, A will inevitably lead to Z." That's that slippery slope idea. And so therefore we have to stay as strict to A as we can so that we never flirt with the line because we will all ultimately end up in Z. So that's one way that legalism can go.

The other way is thinking of it as like a Rube Goldberg device where you have, like, the shoe kicks the can that swings the pendulum that knocks over the dominoes that pop the balloon that make the toaster go and then you make breakfast — that vastly over-complicated way to do something pretty simple.

And these are two different ways that legalism can work. The internal part is when we impose those standards within ourselves. Say, "I'm not going to hold anyone else to this, but for myself, I'm the only one who can know me, and I know that my motives

were not absolutely perfectly pure on this," or, "Maybe they were, but maybe they won't. Ooh, the fact that I'm even questioning it means that maybe they were. Oh my gosh." And so you start getting that spiral that goes down.

Or you think, "Okay, that's good enough for everyone, but I'm going to hold myself to this higher standard because I know I can" — so again, going back to that example of "pray continually" — "and so I am going to never stop praying in my mind, and that's okay if other people don't need to do that. But for me, I know it is on my conscience that I need to do this. So I will be praying continually." And it leads to you become imprisoned by your own conscience, essentially, and you're entrapped by your own scruples even if that logical part of your brain says, "This is irrational. These worries and concerns, they're outside the spirit of the law," but it almost becomes addictive because it feels like an element of control.

Because even if it can't change anything, I feel like I'm doing something, and so to do something is better than to do nothing. So when doing this, I'm at least trying to move closer to God, or I'm at least making God happier with who I am.

NATALIE: It's like doing extra credit.

TIFFANY: Right. I think I call it in the book, it's an extra credit. And let me please say that my senior superlative in high school, I was voted most likely to earn extra credit. And this is so real. And, the thing is, I look back on that now and I realize that was not just a reflection of annoying, goody-goody Tiffany in the classroom. That was actually the manifestation of what was going on in my spiritual life and my internal life at the time of, "I have to do more. I have to do extra credit," because we hear, "Well, whoever has been given much, much will be demanded from them." And so, "Well, God gave me these, so more is coming. More is demanded from me, so I have to do more, I have to do better," and that leads to burnout. And honestly, you can start to feel crazy. You can start to feel like you're going insane.

NATALIE: Well, it's spiritual OCD.

TIFFANY: It's exactly what it is, yeah. You can't trust your own brain anymore. And going back to what I was saying earlier about the idea of we shame intuition out of people. And I'm not saying intuition is always right. It's not. I'm not saying you can never leave your comfort zone. Of course you should. But it is okay to trust your gut sometimes. It is okay to listen to yourself. And I was always told when I would struggle with something, if I was like, "But that very strict biblical literalist interpretation, I don't feel like it applies here," and people would be like, "Well, you're just kicking against the

goads," right? But it was never presented to me that maybe the goads is this legalism. And that's what I was kicking against.

And so it was always, "No, no, no, you need to fall in line. You need to do exactly what I tell you the Bible means in this verse." And that's where it gets so damaging. And because it's internal, we hold ourselves to that standard, and then that's again where this anxiety comes in. So in a nutshell, that's what that involuntary internalized legalism is. And I imagine you probably have some listeners right now who are like, "That sounds really exhausting and weird." I am so happy for you because you sound really emotionally healthy. But I also know that you have some listeners right now who are going, "Yeah, I do that."

NATALIE: I think that the whole Bill Gothard movement really indoctrinated an entire generation of Christians like my parents and even me somewhat when I was younger with this exact thing. I remember he always would say, "Others may, I cannot." So even though others had permission that it wasn't unbiblical to do this particular thing, but if you were going to be truly set apart for God, others may do that, but I cannot. And he would use John the Baptist. Others may eat regular food, but I can only have locusts and honey. So then you were always like, "Well, on the spectrum between normal people and John the Baptist, where do I want to fall? I think I need to be like John the Baptist."

TIFFANY: Yes, because otherwise, it's laziness. Because I know I could be doing more or I should be doing more.

NATALIE: Exactly. And the slippery slope, I think that came from Bill Gothard, that whole concept. And when I was a little girl — and this comes out in my book a lot — I was constantly being reminded about the slippery slope. Every single decision was like, "Will this put me on the slippery slope, or will this keep me safe on the narrow road?"

TIFFANY: Well, an important thing to remember is, I think so many of us heard, "You must avoid even the appearance of evil." That's actually not what the text says. That's the King James Version interpretation, but the literal text does not have the word "appearance."

NATALIE: What is it?

TIFFANY: It's really just, "Avoid all evil." Oh, but so many of us were like, "But the appearance of evil. And so somebody could think that I was doing something wrong, and so therefore I must avoid even that."

NATALIE: Right, right. So if you go to a restaurant, make sure you don't have a glass that even looks like it might have alcohol in it. Okay, tell us what the difference is between deconstructing faith and deconstructing God.

TIFFANY: I think this is really important because deconstruction has become such a boogeyman word right now.

NATALIE: It has.

TIFFANY: There are lots of prominent people coming out saying, "Oh, this is horrible, this is going to ruin churches." Part of the problem is that there's not one solid definition that everybody's using. But the way I talk about it in the book is that deconstructing faith means questioning habits and practices around belief. Deconstructing God is questioning whether those beliefs are valid at all, saying, "Do I believe that there's a God? Maybe not. You know what? Maybe all of this is made up and the God, the Judeo-Christian God that I was raised with, is no different from Zeus from mythology." And I know there are some people who have to go through that process, and I respect that and wish them well, and I don't envy them that because that is a hard road to walk.

But this book is written specifically for people who are deconstructing faith, who are saying, "I am a believer; I believe in God. I think there was something valid in this whole character of Jesus here. I think the way this was taught to me is broken, and that's what I want to investigate and that's what I want to interrogate and rid myself — the wheat and the chaff. If we're going to go scriptural here, I think I was fed a whole lot of chaff under the guise of... And so that's what I want to go back and dismantle and look at whatever was damaging and put that aside so that my faith is authentic and real and healthy."

And I want to say, something that I really try to be careful to point out in *Holy Ghosted* is that I am not saying that every pastor is twirling their mustache and cackling while they tie souls to celestial railroad tracks. Not every church is abusive, not every religious leader is abusive, and I make this point, like, this does not even necessarily mean churches. This can mean families. When I say a religious "leader," I mean anyone who has some degree of authority over someone else. So this can be families, this can be radio preachers or ministries or churches.

Not everyone is abusive, but if you're in that situation, and we know that unfortunately these kinds of communities and environments and families exist and these kinds of toxic leaders are prevalent, then this is how you can deal with that. And so I want to

make it very clear that I'm very much not a, "Torch at all." That's not what this book is. It is not an attack on Christianity. It is a calling to accountability for people who would manipulate in the name of Christ.

NATALIE: Yeah, I'm glad you said that. I recently had someone say... Actually, they wrote a review on my podcast and they said, "Natalie attacks the church." And I'm like, no, I don't attack the church. It's because I love the true Church of Jesus Christ that I actually point out issues that I think are fraudulent.

TIFFANY: This is where we can do better.

NATALIE: Exactly. I think deconstructing your faith, yeah, I do believe it's going to disrupt the modern church and disrupt systems, family systems and things, but it's also going to heal the church of Jesus Christ. And that's what I'm trying to do. That's what you're trying to do. And yeah, sometimes it looks like we're on the attack, but it's only because we're attacking the virus or the cancer that is destroying the church.

TIFFANY: That's the same accusation people were lobbing against Jesus. And so I even say in one of the early chapters of the book, Jesus was a deconstructionist. Jesus looked at the religious systems of His day that had become abusive and corrupt and said, "No, this is not what this is about. This is not the point. Let me show you a better way." If we are truly walking in the footsteps of Jesus, we should be doing this.

NATALIE: Yeah. Okay, now each chapter opens with a passage from a classical or popular work of literature, which I love. Can you tell us more about some of those and why you chose them? This is for all of you people who like literature and art, which I do.

TIFFANY: This was honestly one of my favorite parts of writing the book, was thinking about all these passages of literature from years of reading and teaching all these bits and being like, "I get to apply this one now." So we really look at a wide variety of things. Things from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. We look at *The Scarlet Letter*, we look at *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *The Joy Luck Club*. Gabriel García Márquez's *The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*. We look at *King Lear*. There's one chapter that opens with a reference to *The Sound of Music*. And I talk about looking at the barrenness in *The Sound of Music* and the way she manipulates.

So I really try to pull in a lot of these different literary sources because sometimes it's really helpful to see something presented in a different way or in a slightly less familiar format. We can talk about these things in religious terms, but we will come to them

with all our preconceived notions, all our connotations and ideas, and every Sunday School lesson we've ever learned and been taught about what this means. But if we see the same idea presented in a slightly different format, does that open us up to consider this a little bit differently now? So that's really what I wanted to do with all of that.

NATALIE: I was just going to say on the same vein of thinking, you also look at Bible stories, and you kind of subvert them to show how the way that we have been raised to read them and think about them and the little moral lessons that we've been taught from those aren't actually really what they're about or what the point is of those things. So can you give us one or two of those?

TIFFANY: Let's start with the Good Samaritan because I think most people are really familiar with that story. We hear about the Good Samaritan, and that is often spun as, "Look, this man emptied himself on behalf of his wounded neighbor." And you know what? It is a beautiful story and a wonderful call to action for all of us. But something that I think is important to remember when we read it that frankly, I've never heard preached about, is that the Good Samaritan took the wounded traveler, he took him to the inn, he sat with him, and then he paid the innkeeper and said, "Look, here's some money to cover costs. I'm going to come back through. Let me know if there's anything else to look after him," and then he continued on his journey.

The Good Samaritan had boundaries. And so he did not take it upon himself to say, "Okay, every other responsibility that I have to my family, to my business partners, whoever, that's out the window. This is the only thing I'm going to focus on right now," or "I am going to sacrifice my own health for the sake of..." No. I mean, he looked after the man, he did what he could, but he then connected him with the people and resources who were better equipped to treat this man in his affliction. And then he continued on his way and we still call him good because he had boundaries.

And I think especially as Christian women that is something that is not taught to us, not reinforced, not shown, not modeled well. And in no way am I saying, "Don't care about people," — definitely not what I'm saying here — but that I think it's an important detail that gets overlooked so often was that there was a connection with what the man needed, and then this person said, "And now it's time for me to step back. And I'll check in on you, I care, but I'm not going to throw everything else to the side for this one thing." So that's one thing we talk about.

Another story that I kind of look at the reframe of is in John 4. There's the woman at the well, and she's the woman who, if you recall the story, Jesus says, "Go tell your husband," and she says, "Well, I don't have a husband," and He says, "I know. You've

had five husbands, and the man you live with now is not your husband." Every time I've ever heard this story preached on, it is always, "Well, this woman, she was shacking up with some man. This woman has had five husbands. She's this ancient Elizabeth Taylor just burning through husband after husband, divorce after divorce."

Here's the thing: Do you know how many times the word "divorce" actually shows up in that story? The word "divorce" is never spoken in that story. It is never mentioned. And the thing that gets me about this story is we inherently know certain facts that we have been taught to basically just ignore because we've been told this is what the story is about. So marriage in first century Palestine — we're not talking Jane Austen love match courtship stuff. No, this is something the family would have set up. This is something the family would have arranged for this woman.

And divorce was not just an easy thing either. And so if she's gone through five husbands, either they've died on her and she's been widowed — that's an incredible amount of trauma — she has been found unfit and has been rejected by five men, or any combination — three widows and two unfits...

NATALIE: Which doesn't mean that she's unfit.

TIFFANY: It just means that she's been put away. Or perhaps her family was not picking out suitable men; they were not picking good partners. They were not doing their due diligence to say, "This is a good man." And when He says, "The man you're living with now is not your husband," the person's always like, "Well, she's shacking up with him." No. She might be living in just a domestic situation where she's a house cleaner, she lives under the protection of the man's household but is not necessarily in a sexual relationship with him, or this might be basically a non-consensual relationship that she is in simply because it affords her shelter and food and protection in her world. We don't know.

And the thing is, when we cast her as some first-century wild woman, we're bearing false witness against her because we don't actually know, but we have read our own cultural assumptions onto this story. And what Jesus sees is a woman who has gone through incredible trauma. She's Samaritan, so she says, "Well, the ancestors say we have to worship here," and Jesus said, "The time is coming where it doesn't matter where you worship because I'm going to be with you wherever you go." How comforting is that to somebody who has been rejected time after time or abandoned time after time or experienced loss after loss?

And again, her family... This wasn't a failure of morals. This was a failure of the family

systems that were supposed to support her. And so what we see is Jesus talking to a woman in crisis, a woman in trauma, but what we have spun it into is Jesus daring to speak to this sinful, soiled woman, and that is not what scripture says. We have read that on there because that is what our culture says, and that tells us more about our cultural values than Christ.

NATALIE: Yes, I love that. Okay, let's shift now as we wrap this up, and let's talk about some practical things or ways... There might be listeners who are like, "I really struggle with this and I don't know. How am I supposed to overcome this?" I definitely wondered once I realized, "There's something seriously wrong inside of me." I wasn't really sure how to, and I get that question a lot even with the women I'm working with: "How do I come out of this?"

TIFFANY: So I think there are a couple of things to consider. The first is that 1 Corinthians 12 talks about the spiritual gifts that we have, and one of the spiritual gifts that's listed is faith, right? And we don't hear that. We just assume. "Faith should be easy for everyone." No, we see here in scripture that faith is a spiritual gift. So if you struggle with doubt, if faith does not come easily or naturally to you, that doesn't mean you're failing. That simply means that it's not going to come easy and naturally to everyone. Otherwise, it wouldn't be listed as a gift. It wouldn't be unusual, you know?

So maybe you just don't have the spiritual gift of easy faith. That's okay. So that's the first thing to remember is that faith is a spiritual gift, and if that's not yours... We don't shame people for, "They can't talk in tongues. They don't have the gift of healing." We don't shame people for that. Why do we shame people for not having easy faith?

Another one that I think it's important to remember, a lot of times you hear in popular psychology, "The difference between guilt and shame is that guilt means I did something wrong, but shame is something that's wrong with me." And that's helpful, except in Christian circles when we hear, "Well, they'll be known by their fruit," then if I did something wrong it is because something is wrong with me. And so there really isn't that separation. That distinction between guilt and shame really is not helpful for people coming out of authoritarian Christian environments because guilt and shame are melded. They really are one.

And so drawing that distinction may not be as freeing as people want to think it is. Because if I did something wrong, that is a reflection of my heart. So that means my heart is wrong, so I am wrong. So I think that's a really important thing. If you hear that distinction being discussed and it doesn't quite work for you to feel some freedom, I think it's important to recognize that.

And something that I talk about in the book that I think is important is the idea of capturing the second thought. And this is something I struggled with for years. I'd see someone and be like, "Ugh, what a stupid outfit" — first thought — then I'd be like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so horrible, I'm so judgmental, I'm the worst human being." No, man, that's the first thought. That's the knee-jerk, lizard brain that just responds.

But I'd be like, "That was my first thought, so that's a reflection of who I really am before I had a chance to run it through and sanitize it." No, no, your second thought is who you really are because that's the thought that makes you go, "Hold on, that was a knee-jerk reaction, but you know what? Once I stop and actually think about it, I think, 'Oh, you know what? They sure look happy in that, or it sure looks comfortable, or they're rocking it. They're wearing that with confidence, and I admire that.'"

And I think that can even be applied to things like... And it's tricky because I never want to sound like I'm making excuses, but if you have a lustful thought about someone, or like, "Oh my gosh, that person is so hot," and you're like, "Oh my gosh, that was horrible; I'm a horrible person; I shouldn't be thinking that," okay, but then what is that second thought of, "Wow, and they're enjoying a nice lunch with their mother," or "You know what, good job. I'm glad God makes aesthetically beautiful people. That's great."

And then you go on. It doesn't mean that you are an inherently horrible, degenerate worm of a person because you had a thought that you didn't want to have. What is that second thought where you can take a step back and say, "Okay, that was my lizard brain reacting with no filter. And now when I apply my morals and my values, I can say, 'Okay, well, good for them.' And I will carry on." And then you don't have to beat yourself up over that, you don't have to wear the hair shirt and do the mortification of the flesh or anything else. You just capture it and you let it go. And that for me is really helpful in just not being in that constant place of berating myself for not being perfect in every single moment.

NATALIE: Right. How I would describe that with things that I've been talking about on the podcast and in my book is that a part of me had that thought. That initial thought was maybe critical of someone. I would say there's a part of me inside that's critical of me and everybody around me. And that part of me, what kind of healing does that part of me need to come to more of a place of acceptance and love for other people? But that's just a part of me. There's another part of me that feels bad for that person or that admires some other things about that person — you know what I mean? So I think just separating our true, core self from these parts of us that are wounded and that have been programmed with interesting ideas is important. Also, like you said, it alleviates that shame.

TIFFANY: Absolutely. Also, having spiritual anxiety, we're told that the Holy Spirit, when we can't pray, Romans 8:26: That idea of, the Holy Spirit said, "We don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes with groaning too deep for words," so maybe that's the Spirit groaning in response to recognizing something's wrong in my environment. I am enduring abuse. I am being manipulated. I am being taught obedience rather than love or being shown a demand for obedience rather than love. That's the Spirit grieving inside of us.

And so you don't have to look at that and be like, "Oh, the Spirit's constantly disappointed in me." No, maybe the Spirit is responding to what's in your environment and grieving for you, for what you have endured. And I think that's important to remember. We hear that your body is the sanctuary for the Holy Spirit and we hear sometimes, "Well, sin against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin."

Well then, if somebody has sinned against your body, they've sinned against the Holy Spirit. And that is not something you did. That is grieving the Holy Spirit, and then the Holy Spirit grieving for you and crying out to God on your behalf. Not crying out because you are horrible — crying out because you have endured something that you were never supposed to have to endure.

NATALIE: Yeah, that's beautiful. Okay, I just want to say one last thing and then we are going to wrap it up. If anyone is listening to this and you think, "I struggle with this, but I also know people, there are maybe other women that I talked to in my church or women in my neighborhood that really struggle with this or maybe even friends that I have online," this is an amazing book to go through together with some other women. I guess there could be men listening to this. She has put together some really good discussion questions at the back of the book for each chapter. And you guys have to remember she is a professor, so she knows how to ask those discussion questions to get you talking.

So I think that is a super helpful tool to help people process through with other people, with other empathetic witnesses, what you've gone through and interact with the material that Tiffany's put together in this book. So I just wanted to throw that out there as well. Are there any closing thoughts that you want to say?

TIFFANY: I would say if you have seen yourself or heard yourself reflected in any of this conversation, it's that double-edged sword of I wish no one else felt this way. I would love for this to be a club of one, but it's not, so just know you're not alone. And it can feel so isolating sometimes because we don't talk about these things because this is the thing we're not supposed to discuss. And so I would just say please understand that

there are countless other people who are experiencing this as well and that it is okay to want to be healthy and it is okay to want to have a relationship with God that is not based in fear or manipulation or power imbalance or shame or praise.

I have a whole section where I talk about how praise can be used to control people. It is okay to want to be free of that and just do the work you need to do to be healthy, to prioritize life, because that is what God wants for you more than the perfect compliance to every point of minutiae in the law. God wants you to be safe and healthy.

NATALIE: And He wants you to know that He's not going to ghost you if we just want to bring it right back to the title, Holy Ghosted. I think some of the worst traumas in our lives is the threat of being ghosted by people that we love and that we also need to be loved by, and of course, the ultimate would be if God ghosted us, if God decided that He was no longer going to have anything to do with us, and that is never, ever, ever going to happen. He is inextricably bound up inside of you, within you. You will never, ever be ghosted by God. Thank you so much, Tiffany, for sharing your beautiful book with us. I hope it's so successful. I hope everyone gets it. I think it's going to be a really healing tool for many, many hundreds of people who have really been suffering with this kind of spiritual anxiety throughout their lives.

TIFFANY: Thank you so much for making space to let me talk about these things and just for making space about these broader issues in general. I think, like you said, that's so important and it's so encouraging to be able to work with each other so we can all heal together.

NATALIE: For sure.