

HOW TO REFRAME AND RECOVER FROM AN ABUSIVE SERMON

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 273 of the Flying Free Podcast. Six years ago at the time of this recording, I attended a large Baptist church in my area, and I was shocked by what I heard in the sermon that morning. Shocked enough that I took good notes, and then I wrote a letter to the pastor and his team. And then I posted that letter on my website. And now I'm going to share that letter with you because it is still as relevant today as it was back then, and my guess is that many of you have heard similar messages preached from similar pulpits, and maybe you sat in the pew feeling oppressed and gross but you didn't know why, and you didn't know what you could do about it anyway. Well, I hope that this letter will help you see why a sermon like this would have made you feel so terrible. So here's my letter:

"I came to worship within your walls this morning. I came to worship and I left with 100 other women, every single one bleeding. I began my worship journey within the walls of another, smaller church when I was seven years old. I fell in love with Jesus that day. I wanted to be a missionary. I wanted to be a pastor's wife. (I was aware that girls couldn't be pastors.) I wanted to be like Corrie Ten Boom and Elizabeth Elliott and Ann Kiemel, my heroes. I wanted to share Jesus with everyone I knew. I wanted to live and breathe and die for Him. I loved Him as much as a girl possibly could."

I'm just going to take a break from the letter here and just say, at the time that I wrote this letter I had not written my story yet, but I have now, and I wrote a memoir called *All the Scary Little Gods*. You can get it on Amazon in Kindle, paperback, and Audible formats. In the Audible, I read it, and my little parts help me out. So there are several of us that are reading that story in Audible. It's not just my story, though. It's also a pathway. Really, I show you, through my own life experience, a pathway out of emotional and spiritual abuse. Anyway, let's get back to the letter now.

"I did share Jesus with everyone I knew. I got in trouble for it at school with my peers. You hit a certain age and it's not cool to share Jesus anymore, but I did anyway. By the time I graduated, I was affectionately voted 'Most likely to become a nun.' I had a reputation for loving Jesus. I went to a small Christian college in Roseville, Minnesota, and held leadership positions there, working with other college women in the dorms, doing discipleship.

When I graduated, I taught English in a small Christian school and listened to the teenage woes of my students after school hours. Later, I raised support and went into

full-time ministry working on the University of Minnesota campus doing what I loved — sharing Jesus with women. I loved my life, and then I got married and everything changed.

But this letter isn't about me. This letter is actually about 100 other women who were sitting inside those same walls with me this morning. Did you know that among those who claim faith in Jesus, the vast majority of divorces are initiated by wives in their forties and fifties?"

Now, by the way, I know people have asked me, "Well, where'd you get that statistic?" There have been between 4,000 - 5,000 women that have come through my program in the last seven years. And most of them, if you put it on a bell curve, most of them fall in their forties and fifties. And the ones that actually get divorced, that go through a divorce process, are usually right around that age as well. So that's where I get that from. It's very unscientific, but this next statistic, I'll say what it is and then I'll talk about it a little bit.

"Did you know that the top three reasons these women give for initiating divorce are 1. spousal adultery, 2. spousal addiction, and 3. spousal abuse? And did you know that of the men who initiate divorce in Christian marriages, the number one reason is infidelity — their own?"

Now, where did I get those from? I listened to a teaching many years ago and I took copious notes on it, and I used to link to it and then they took it down. So I can't even tell you where I got those from. But if you think about it, it kind of makes sense. And in my experience in talking with thousands of women and hearing their stories — and they're all Christian women that I work with — I would say that these statements line up exactly with what I've seen worked out in my own program. So, back to the letter. Sorry, I keep interrupting myself.

"What does this communicate to you? I hope it raises your awareness of a massive epidemic in the church and how it destroys women and children. One out of three women sitting in your auditorium this morning are likely being emotionally, spiritually, and sometimes even physically abused by their intimate male partner or their 'Christian' husband when they go home.

I'm just taking a wild guess, but let's say there were 300 women in there. That means that 100 of them are in one of the deepest, darkest, most hidden and prolonged sufferings of the human race. Many of these women have been enduring emotional and spiritual abuse for two to three decades, and they are wiped out physically,

emotionally, and spiritually.

Many of them are on prescription drugs for depression and anxiety. They've got hormone imbalances and their immune systems are shot. Most of them suffer from complex post-traumatic stress disorder because long-term covert abuse does that to a person. It messes with their bodies in unseen ways. So I just want you to keep that in mind as I recap some things that you taught them today.

1. You taught them from the book of Jude that when people get tired of their marriages, they want to change. So rather than staying committed, they decide to 'Do it their own way.' They say, 'I'll be my own authority,' and they discard their marriages in pursuit of their own selfish desires." That's what this guy said in the sermon.

"When you said that, 100 women who are regularly begging God for mercy on their bathroom floors, begging God to end their lives so they can find relief — those women experienced paralyzing terror and despair. They may have even heard from an abuse hotline or secular counselor — Bible counselors tend to re-abuse them, so they do eventually find real help from the secular culture, which seems to be more educated about abuse dynamics — they may have heard that they should get to a place of safety, but they love Jesus.

They are committed in ways most folks can't fathom, and they are far from selfish. They've sacrificed everything on the altar of marriage: Their girlhood dreams of being in a safe, loving relationship, their careers, their desire to use their gifts and skills, and they know that if they were to stand up and tell the truth about their marriage, they would be accused by people like you of being selfish, of 'Doing it their own way,' of 'Being their own authority.'

They believe they are earmarked for a lifetime of abuse. Why? Because you told them God says so. You taught them it's His will for them. If they were to rebelliously believe otherwise, you would accuse them of not knowing God. Ask me how I know.

2. You said, 'If what I'm saying feels offensive to you, you are identifying with worldly captivity instead of biblical reality.' When you said that, 100 women were offended, not in an angry way, but in an utterly hopeless, 'I wish I was dead' way. Because you damned them for 'identifying with a worldly captivity.' And you also damned them for being forced to be in a position to be damned. It is the quintessential Catch-22 of abuse, and you played a huge part in that today.

3. You said there are consequences for this 'selfish autonomy': destruction. When you

said that, if any of those 100 women had been considering getting to a safe place, they are now terrified to make any moves because what is unsafe now is at least familiar. But this nebulous destruction that you spoke of? That is an unknown terror they can only guess at and have nightmares over. Perhaps it will involve her children, and she can't let that happen. So even though the long-term consequences for children growing up in abusive homes are devastating, and statistically they do much better when mom is safe and emotionally well, the unknown destruction that you said would come upon them is not worth taking a chance on getting them to a place of truth and safety.

You taught them that it is better to sit in church and smile, to keep pretending that all is well. You taught them that it's better to deny and enable than to risk losing everything. Besides, if they were to get out of their abusive relationship, they would have to initiate the end of a marriage, and then you would label them as a 'covenant breaker,' a 'marriage destroyer.'

They don't realize yet, and you've never told them, that it's actually their abuser who broke covenant with them, that it's actually their abuser who has destroyed the marriage. But more importantly to Jesus, their abuser has destroyed the human lives within that marriage, including his own. If they were to initiate the end of their abusive marriage, you would force them to pay a heavy price. You reminded them of that heavy price this morning. It lay like a cold, threatening mountain in the depths of their being.

4. You told them their bodies didn't belong to them. You told them their lives didn't belong to them. When you said that, you reinforced the message they get every day from their abuser, that they exist for one reason only: to service the abuser. Their bodies belong to their abuser. Their lives belong to their abuser. You told them that if they were to rise up and make any other choice, they would be in rebellion against God, their abuser, and the church. Why? Because you taught them that God speaks through their authority. And you taught them that their authority is their husband and you, the church leader.

They have no choices. They have no autonomy. You stripped that away from them. They are only 100 hidden women sitting next to abusers in the pews of your church, and you are keeping them there. And unlike their abusive husbands who didn't hear a damn word you said, these women took every single word to heart.

Let me back up a minute now. I get what you were saying. I get it. I really do. I've been going to church, reading my Bible through every year, doing Bible studies, listening to sermons online, and reading bazillions of nonfiction Christian books for forty years." Forty-six years now since it's been six years since I wrote that.

“Everything you said is true unless you are talking to an abuse survivor and an abuser. Here's what you need to understand. An abuse survivor believes there is grace for everyone but her. Believes she is only worth love when she is making her abuser and her church happy with her. Believes she will not be heard or believed. Is scared. Is exhausted. Is hiding to survive. Feels crazy, feels hopeless, feels unloved.

Her abuser acts as if he is entitled to whatever he wants when he wants it. Demands grace and forgiveness without repenting or asking. Ignores his wife's voice. Blames his wife for his sin. Minimizes his sin. Expects submission. Expects unquestioning support. Expects to get his way. Is intermittently kind and then mean depending on his agenda. There is a world of difference between the sheep and the wolves.

Shepherds who love the sheep need to get this straight. I'm asking you — no, I'm begging you to keep those 100 women in focus when you preach. Because if you knew who they were when you looked out over that sea of faces and if their upturned eyes were looking into yours, I would like to believe that you would feel compassion and understanding and that you would phrase things more carefully. I don't know if the problem is that you don't care about those 100 women, or if the problem is that you simply aren't aware that those women exist in your church.

Bear with me and I'll explain my unwanted confusion. You see, I was excommunicated from a church that, for many years, I assumed just wasn't aware of me and others like me. I assumed it must be a lack of awareness because I absolutely could not fathom anyone so flippantly not caring. It was so foreign to my thinking and so unlike the Jesus I knew. But now I know they really and truly didn't care, and it was more than just a lazy apathy. It was a deeply rooted misogyny that was so thick I could feel it.

But you know what? I don't know anyone in this new church of yours that I've been going to for a couple of years now. I've kept my head down. I've desperately wanted to go back to my innocent belief that church folks are good folks who care. Assuming you do care, and this really was just a matter of your being unaware, I have some ideas for how you can preach and teach while keeping a large, wounded segment of your church body.

1. Instead of saying, ‘Your body doesn't belong to you. Your life doesn't belong to you,’ how about saying this: ‘Your body and your life belong to Jesus, your ultimate authority. As long as you are connected to the vine and seeing truth and living out the law of love, which trumps the law according to the gospel of John, you are doing well. Sometimes following Jesus's authority means disobeying worldly authority, which can also be found in a church and home setting. An example of this would be a woman being emotionally

and spiritually abused in her home. Her body belongs to Jesus, not her abuser.

And by the way, not only does your life and your body belong to Jesus, but your spouse's life and body belong to Jesus as well. So if you're not treating your spouse's life and body with loving honor, then you're missing the point of grace.' Now, that's a message that would speak living truth to both the victim of the abuse and the abuser. It would deliver hope to a victim and truth to an abuser.

Abusers almost never repent. It's part of what makes them abusers and not just your average Christian sinner. Getting a hard-hearted individual to repent and change, though, is not your job. That's God's job. Telling the truth is your job. A victim needs to know that while her life and body belongs to Jesus, her Creator has given only one human being full, 100% stewardship over that life and body. You know who that is? That is herself. This is not selfish autonomy. This is common sense responsibility and personal accountability. And it saves lives.

2. Instead of saying, 'If you make a decision autonomously, you are rebellious and will reap the consequences, which will be destruction,' how about saying this? 'We need to make decisions before God. Sometimes other people won't like our decisions, but we need to obey God rather than men. When we make a decision with God's guidance, we can rest assured that He will bring good from that decision. Maybe not right away, but down the road, because He's always working things for our good when we obey Him.'"

By the way, I want to break in here and just say, I wrote this six years ago and I might phrase this a little bit differently now because sometimes we can obey God — and I actually talk about this in my new book, *All the Scary Little Gods* — sometimes we can obey God in the ways that we think that we're called to do that.

Maybe it's like in my case, I really believed at one point that God wanted me to file for divorce. I still believe that He did. But that doesn't mean that life is going to be really easy after that. Just because you obey God doesn't mean that the pathway forward is going to be easy. I have this chapter in the book called "Forks" and it talks about forks in the road, and I've talked about forks in the road in my program as well as on the podcast here. I don't know where, but I know that I've talked about it before.

But when we make decisions for our lives, sometimes what we see, it's like both paths are very difficult when we look at what's initially on each path. But when you walk down one path, eventually, number one, there's going to be beautiful treasures that you can find along that path, and eventually it's going to lead to, ultimately, maybe a smoother road, perhaps. Not always, but sometimes it does. I would say for me, going through

the divorce process was horrible and all of that was very, very difficult. The aftermath, there was a lot of very difficult things afterward as well.

However, when I look back at my life before my divorce and then after, it was a very, very, very different life. And I would never in a million years want to go back to that prior marriage. The opportunities that I've had since I've gotten out, it exponentially increased those opportunities and opened up my world.

Whereas if I had chosen the other path, it would have felt more comfortable to me since it was very, very familiar to my body and my psyche. That path also looked like the right path because everyone was screaming at me that that was the right path. All the little scary gods were yelling at me. And so I felt like I had to actually tolerate their disapproval and take the path that looked harder at first in order to get to a place where God could actually bring a lot of good out of it.

Now, let's say that I had chosen the other path and I had chosen to stay married. Would God work things together for good along that path? Well, the God that I believe in who is a God of love and who is always with me no matter which path I choose — yes, I believe God would have brought good out of that as well.

However, I don't know what that would be, and when I think about the quality of that good and how it would reverberate into the future, I don't think it would have been even remotely what I've been able to see in my life on the path that I did choose.

And one thing that I always teach people to is no matter which path you take, you can always pivot. If you're on a path and you start feeling in your body and in your brain that this path is not safe and that there's something wrong with it, you can always change your mind and pivot and go down into a new direction. Always. It's never, ever too late and you're never too old to make that choice.

So anyway, I just want to clarify that because I'm not the kind of Christian who believes, "Well, if you obey God, then everything is going to go great and God works all things together for good to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose." Yes, the Bible does say that, but is the interpretation of that that your life is problem-free? Nobody will ever die, you'll never get sick, you'll have lots of money, you'll drive a nice car, and A, B, C, D, and all the way down the road of all the things that you think make a great life? No, it doesn't mean that at all. So I just wanted to clarify that. I could do a whole podcast just on that, but we need to move on and finish this letter because it's a long one. All right:

“Now that's a message that communicates freedom to a victim. Freedom to look to God as her authority, not fraudulent authority. It also communicates to an abuser that he is not God, and his wife gets to look to God for direction and help. She is not to be controlled by the selfish whims of a man.

3. Instead of saying, ‘If you're offended by my message, you are operating from a worldly perspective.’” Excuse me, I have to break in here one more time and just go, that blows me away that a guy could stand up in front of people and go, “Yeah, and if anyone's offended by what I'm saying, then that means that you are operating from a worldly perspective.” Who in the hell does he think he is? I'll tell you what happened to this guy later because a lot of things can happen in six years and they have, but we'll get to that in a minute.

“So instead of saying that, how about saying this? ‘This message isn't meant to offend the sensibilities of those who are hurting here today. There may be folks here who are fresh out of battle and bleeding out, and this message isn't meant to shoot another bullet through your chest. But if you are confident that you have the right to do whatever you want, whenever you want, with no accountability whatsoever, then this message may offend you. It should offend you.’

Now that's a message that communicates love to a victim, love that says, ‘We are here to bind up your wounds, not carve out more bloody places in your heart for us to suck.’ It also sends a message to abusers. It lets them know that you actively care about victims, that you don't pussyfoot around covert abusers, hoping to keep their tithe. You hold them accountable even if it means they leave your church.

4. Instead of saying, ‘When people get tired of their marriages they want to change, and they rebelliously discard their vows and find a new partner,’ how about saying this? ‘There may be people in this room who feel tired of their marriage and want a change. They may be having an affair. They may be considering discarding their spouse by filing for divorce. Or even more common, they may discard their spouse every day in the way they emotionally or spiritually or physically treat them.

To be clear, I am not referring to those who are forced, through no desire of their own, to initiate a divorce to end an abusive marriage. Divorce for the purpose of protection and safety is not what I'm talking about. We want our women and children to be emotionally, spiritually, and physically safe here at our church. Always remember, there are more ways than one to discard your spouse, and abuse is far more common than divorce.’

Now that is a message that communicates hope to a victim, hope that says she is safe to tell the truth in your church without being accused of gossiping and slandering her husband. Hope that says you will support her if she decides it is in her best interest to make legal what has already been destroyed. It also communicates to those 100 abusers that you have zero tolerance for their behaviors. You will not harbor them, enable them, and encourage them. They will repent and turn toward the living God for mercy, or they will reap the consequences of their behavior: losing their family.

Why am I so passionate about this? Because I spent twenty-five years begging for help from the two churches we were members of and nobody heard or helped me. In the end, I was forced to initiate a divorce on my own with very little support from anyone at my church. Going through a lengthy separation and lengthy divorce was by far the most hellish experience of my life. My church not only refused to comfort and support me through it, they excommunicated me for it. The destruction you speak of came from one place only: the church.

Praise God, He is not a destroyer of women. I am now in a healthy marriage relationship, and I sat in the front row this morning with a man who loves and respects me. That is part of his redemption story for my life. I trusted Jesus when I was bullied for my faith as a child. I trusted Jesus when I was in my abusive marriage. I trusted Jesus when I was separated. I trusted Jesus when I divorced. I trusted Jesus when my church betrayed me. I trusted Jesus when I remarried. And I will trust Jesus as He gives me a platform to advocate for others. Jesus is the air I breathe, the food I eat, and the Savior I trust.

But I will always hear certain types of sermons through the ears of an abuse survivor. I will always see those 100 women in the room. I'm asking for one simple thing. I'm asking you to see them too."

That pastor responded to my email. He accused me of "grossly slandering him." And then he said he wanted to get together with me to "reconcile." Now, I didn't even know this guy. There was no relationship there, so I'm not sure what he meant by "reconcile." I think he wanted to get together with me so that he could light into me. So I responded and I said this:

"Let's pretend that you are a medical doctor who just gave a medical talk to a room full of people, some of whom have a medical condition that makes your advice dangerous to follow. Now let's pretend someone brings several nearly dead people to your office the next day along with reports of an epidemic breaking out — an epidemic caused by some of the advice you gave in your talk. They beg you to look at the patient and

consider the symptoms of hundreds of others in your city so that you will be able to help solve the problem. And here's how you responded.”

Now, what I'm going to say next is what he wrote. It's the words that he used, but I'm rephrasing it in terms of my analogy here: “Before we can talk about these dying people, I want clarity over what I said in the talk and how it was represented. I believe strongly that your characterization of what I said is grossly out of context. If you truly respect me as a doctor, then I believe you owe me the opportunity to clarify what was said. And honestly, this should have been done before you went public and tried to help anyone. Is your goal to help a few people? My goal is reconciliation. It is clear you felt offended by my lecture, and it is clear that I feel I've been grossly slandered.

Until I get to clarify myself and you get to repent of your bringing up the problem, it will be difficult for us to continue with discussing the problem. Your husband is more than welcome to attend, and please know that I will have a member of the hospital board and possibly my wife attending with me.”

“Shepherd, instead of looking at the problem” — this is me talking now to him again in the email — “instead of looking at the problem and hearing the bleats of the sheep over on my website, you've chosen to make this about yourself. This is not about reconciliation. Contrary to your assertion that I'm offended, I'm not, because you didn't sin against me in your sermon, nor did you sin against anyone in your congregation.

I'm not going to reiterate here what I've already written about what you did do. Please refer to past emails as well as the article for that. You are saying I have grossly slandered you, but that's untrue. The definition of slander is ‘The action or crime of making a false spoken statement damaging to a person's reputation.’

I've not mentioned you or your church publicly, and I haven't attacked you or your character. I have simply critiqued the words of a public sermon and tried to demonstrate how those words sound in the ears of an abuse survivor. I have brought a problem to your attention. It's tragic that you have not heard their voices. Tragic for them, tragic for the gospel, and tragic for you. I'm incredibly busy with my work, and I imagine you are as well. Our goals for a meeting aren't the same, therefore it would be a waste of our time.”

Well, he never responded to that email, and that told me that his sermon was not just due to ignorance. It was due to his already-established misogynistic mindset. And sure enough, a couple of years later he was asked to resign due to allegations of sexual misconduct earlier in his career. Preying on teenaged women is a blatant indicator of a

misogynistic mindset. Shortly after he was asked to resign, he started a brand new church in the area with the help of all of his followers who also were not able to see through his charismatic personality. Men like this eventually goof up, though. It's just a matter of time before his mask slips and someone else gets hurt.

The reason I'm bringing this up here on my podcast is because I want you to be able to not only recognize these kinds of messages spoken in certain kinds of churches but also to be able to unhook from these kinds of messages. Again, if you would like to hear about how I was programmed as a child and young adult, what happened in my life as a result of that programming, and how I deprogrammed and changed the entire course of my life as well as the lives of my kids, I wrote a book called *All the Scary Little Gods*. You can get it on Kindle, Audible, or paperback on Amazon.

I'm going to read just one little review here: "I absolutely loved this book. It was so empowering to read Natalie's story. My story, although slightly different, was just as affected by toxic culture. I felt my anxiety and depression lift as I read her words. Narcissists, who controlled the narrative in my life, scared me into submissions I didn't even realize. Trying to be a good girl so that God would be proud of me, I became entrapped in a culture that I know now God did not design for me. It was a relief to read that it is okay to detach from people pleasing and instead focus on who I really am and what life I want to live.

The honesty in Natalie's book was so refreshing, so real, so enlightening. Hearing her reveal her inner thoughts normalized my own thoughts during my growing-up years. I loved the thought that I always have had a great empathic witness in my life. It is a rare book that can be both entertaining and life-changing. A very good, easy read. I couldn't put it down."

Thank you for that review. At the time of this recording, there are over sixty reviews on Amazon. It's been out for one week. I'm so grateful to everyone who's already read it and reviewed it. I wanted to say one more thing because I realized that this is... It's a big book. It's 395 pages. It's very hefty and it has 89 chapters.

And that might feel like, "Oh my gosh, that's so overwhelming. I don't think I could read a book that long with that many chapters," but here's how I set it up, and I did this on purpose specifically with abuse survivors in mind. Instead of giving you a big, huge baked potato that has tons of stuffing in it that you feel like, "Oh my gosh, I've got to eat that whole thing..." Maybe if you're starving you really would want to eat the whole thing, but sometimes we just don't want to sit down and eat a great big, huge potato in one sitting.

But when someone gives you a bag of potato chips, that's a different story. And that's what my book is. My book is a bag of potato chips. Every chapter is very short. It's very power-packed. It's got a little bit of a punch that's going to give you a bit of a dopamine hit just like a potato chip would. It's easy to eat. It's very tasty and salty and addicting, and it just makes you want to have, "You know what, I just want just one more, one more chapter. One more chip, that's it." And then you read that chapter and then you think, "They're so short. Let me just have one more. I'm just going to read one more."

They are entertaining. Some of them are pretty funny. And yet also, I tried to put something very profound in every single chapter. Something that would make your mind tilt, and it would turn on, maybe not a light bulb, but it would light a little candle. And by the end of the book, you're going to have 89 little candles lit in your dark corner of the universe, and it's going to light up your whole life.