

SOMETIMES DIVORCE IS A GIFT OF MERCY

Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of 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 28 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today I have a guest, Jeni B., who's the founder and owner of Biz Mavens. Jeni is also an emotional abuse survivor, a divorcee, and a personal friend of mine. We are going to be talking today about the perks of being divorced. I realize that might sound kind of strange, because divorce is not generally thought of as a positive thing. But when you're married to an abusive individual, divorce can be a mercy of God.

Many emotional abuse victims are fearful about divorce and what's on the other side. It's true that walking through divorce is not a walk in the park. It's terrifying. But I always say that when you are married to an abuser you have two choices: hell and hell. One hell leads to more hell; the other hell leads to freedom. It's that freedom and all the perks that come with it that we are going to be talking about today. So welcome, Jeni.

JENI: Thanks so much, Natalie. It's so fun to be with you.

NATALIE: We were talking right before we got started about a book we both read that planted some ideas in our head about what divorce would be like if we ever dared to think about that as a possibility from our marriages. Do you want to talk a little about that?

JENI: Yeah. I don't know if we're mentioning names here, but over the course of my ten-year marriage I read so many marriage books and parenting books, because I've always been an intentional person. I had the experience, like a lot of women do, where it was on the honeymoon that the mask came off and the really toxic behavior started with my ex. But as a Christian and as I had committed growing up, "I'm never going to get divorced. Divorce is not an option."

So many of those books I read put a toxic spin on marriage. I'm sure the advice would be fine if you were in a healthy relationship, but if you're not in a healthy relationship, it gives the abuser the upper hand and a way to exploit, manipulate, and take advantage. We were talking before you hit "record" about this book and the picture they paint about what happens to divorced women.

I guess you'll be sharing yours in a minute, but the scene I remember from that book is where they paint the picture of divorce as something you shouldn't even consider no matter how bad it is, because it's like being on a merry-go-round. It only gets uglier every time you go around, basically trying to prevent people from thinking you would ever get married again or you would ever be looking for love again or that there are any husbands that are better than your husband. You're not supposed to fantasize about a marriage with anyone else. You're not supposed to fantasize that your existing husband would not be part of that picture.

It was so terrifying. I read this probably two years into my marriage, and I'll tell you it kept me stuck for the next eight years after that, because I kept envisioning being on this merry-go-round with my children where it only gets uglier. The scenery only gets uglier every time you go around.

NATALIE: Yeah. I think we can say the name of the book. It's "Created to Be His Help Meet" by Debi Pearl.

JENI: Yes.

NATALIE: I don't remember the exact words she used to describe this, but I remember walking away from this one section of the book and envisioning that if you ever got divorced, you would be a woman sitting... In my mind, there was a picture of a trailer in a trailer park with a woman who was living in squalor, wearing a cotton dress with holes and dirt all over it, with stringy hair, and she hasn't bathed in weeks.

JENI: Like in the Great Depression.

NATALIE: Exactly! Like the Great Depression.

JENI: Like the dust bowl.

NATALIE: That's exactly it. "The Grapes of Wrath." That was your for sure destiny should you ever even remotely entertain the faintest thought of getting divorced from your husband. So I, like you, never even thought of it. It wasn't even on the radar as a thought other than, "Oh my word. Those poor women who actually do it are going from the frying pan into the fire, and that's really sad. Why would you do that? That's like committing suicide. I wouldn't do that."

JENI: Yeah. To be clear, at that time, when I look back on that, I think that is so toxic. How could I have believed so many of the things that are in that book? But at the time I

read this, which was probably ten or twelve years ago when I read that, I was on board. I was 100%. I had been brainwashed, and I hung onto every word.

You know I'm an intelligent person. It's another fallacy that intelligent women don't get bait-and-switched. But I wanted to believe that I had the power to control my circumstances, that I had the power within my marriage and there was something I could do. If I was just good enough, if I served the best kind of food, if I was the best keeper of my home, if I was frugal and made my bread from scratch and soaked all my grains, and if I did all of these things, then I would end up with a respectful marriage. That was a false hope I was clinging to.

What it actually did was imprison me, because I tried and I tried. I look back on it now and I don't necessarily regret it because when I walked away, I knew I had been THE model wife 98-99% of the time. Any healthy man who was married to a woman who was doing these things would just be kissing the ground she walked on.

NATALIE: Right.

JENI: I was able to look back and know that I did my best. I absolutely know that I did. But that said, there is this fear. I remember in the process of getting a divorce or even contemplating it... Honestly, I contemplated divorce for about two or three weeks before I proceeded with it. It was not something that had been in my plans or my consideration. It was not drawn out over years and years. There were some very traumatic things that led to this, some extreme things, but I had always struggled. I did not realize how unhappy and miserable I was because I was homeschooling my children and trying to put on my Mary Poppins face for them.

But that three or four week period where I was contemplating finding a lawyer, I was terrified. I thought I was ruining my life. I thought I was ruining my children's lives. I was afraid. I had that dust bowl picture that you just talked about, and I had bit on that false belief that "God hates divorce" and that basically I was choosing to be the brazen woman and go out on my own, full of pride, thinking that I could do better than what God had provided me with, and in divorcing I was choosing against God. All those fears are there.

But I could not even have imagined that three and a half years later, life would be so good, so sweet, and so positive. My very worst day that I have now (because life has ups and downs) is better than the best day I ever had when I was married to an abuser.

NATALIE: Yep. It's crazy, isn't it? Let me jump in here and say that even though Jeni took

three or four weeks to think about divorce, some of us, like myself, took two years or longer to think about divorce before we finally pulled the trigger. It's different for everyone. But that sick feeling in your gut when you are thinking, "Is this really going that direction?" literally makes you feel nauseous and sick. I had that for two years, and I did not want to get divorced.

I really wanted a miracle. I wanted someone to come in and rescue us. I thought, "I'll take anything, just don't let me be divorced," because I did not want to go down that path. I didn't want my kids to all go to hell or any of those threats that people had given. By the time I finally did it, I was at the place where it was so bad that I knew I could never go back. I was thinking about killing myself, and I decided that divorce was probably better than me leaving this earth and leaving my kids behind.

Then I found out what was on the other side of divorce. My divorce process was long. It took almost two years. But on the other side was something that really was a normal life. I have a normal life now. It's amazing. But normal is absolutely incredible! That's what we're going to be talking about with today's podcast. So with that long introduction, let's dig in and find out what some of the perks of being divorced are. What's on the other side, Jeni?

JENI: I think the first thing that everybody warns you about is children from a "broken home." They have all these statistics that they want to throw at you. You feel like you are choosing yourself over the well-being of your children if you choose divorce, that in divorcing their abusive father you are breaking their home, and they would be okay if you didn't take this action.

But what I found is actually the opposite. I know it's not ideal. Lord knows I wish I had been in a healthy marriage with normal problems and normal struggles and difficulties and all the upsides of a healthy marriage as well. But my kids have one healthy home now rather than having one "whole" home – that's not a broken home. Rather than have a home where they couldn't get away, they couldn't hide, they couldn't escape into themselves to get away from the abuse of their mother (who knows if it would have turned onto the children – it may have or it may not have), and where they were witnessing absolutely toxic conditions every single day, now they only have to be in that environment part of the time. The other part of the time, since I chose divorce, I can give them a really healthy, positive, together family. My kids and I are a family now.

NATALIE: And they see what normal is. Before, they didn't even have the opportunity to see or experience "normal." Now they do, and as they are growing up, they can make their own decisions based on having experienced what toxic is and what normal is.

They can make their own decisions about what they want for their own lives in the future.

JENI: Yeah, and I'm so glad I did that while my kids were young. It's been the most difficult on my son who is now twelve. We divorced when he was nine. It has absolutely been the hardest on him. My four, seven, and nine year olds, obviously they have plenty to deal with, but they feel that this is a safe and happy place to be.

NATALIE: Yes, that's a good point. I've experienced that in my own family as well. I have nine kids, so half of my kids were older, teenage types and up, and the other half were little, grade school and down. My youngest, when I first separated, was only one. I've talked to many of you survivors with the same story every time. The younger ones do so much better with divorce than the older ones. The older ones really struggle because that's all they've known. They've grown up in that environment. That's all they've known. So even when it breaks up, they aren't necessarily on board to say, "This is a toxic environment." How would they know? They don't know anything different.

They do come around eventually. All of my kids have come around except my oldest son who was out of the house by the time we separated, so that was all he ever really knew. He's never known anything else. He's never met my current husband. He won't get involved in our lives at all, which is really sad, but I'm hoping he'll come around some day.

That's just a little tip for those of you who have younger kids and are thinking it may be going in that direction. Some of you must wait for lots of different reasons, financial or whatever. But if you don't have to wait and the only thing that is holding you back is thinking, "What will this do to my little kids?" hopefully this will help untangle that thread for you, and you'll see that's not really a reason to hold back. If you're going to do it anyway, it's better to do it when they are younger than when they are older.

JENI: Yes, absolutely, and I would add also that kids are so resilient, especially the little ones. They are adaptable. They are resilient. At the younger ages, they don't even process things that are happening outside of them. They are still so self-absorbed. I can have my children in play therapy now. They have a counselor who listens to them and is helping them grow in different ways than I am able to as a mom. So being able to give my kids a healthy home is probably the number one benefit – the perk – of being a divorcee from a toxic marriage.

NATALIE: Okay, Jeni, I know you have some other perks you want to share, but before we move onto those, can we talk about another perk that's related to this one? Maybe this is on your list, but the perk of just being a better parent?

JENI: That was my next one!

NATALIE: Awesome! Go for it.

JENI: I used to think that I had an anger problem, and I used to think I had a problem with being impatient. I used to have a lot of self-loathing around that because I was really identifying with Paul in the scriptures. "Woe to me! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" I was frustrated because I would not be doing the things that I knew that I should be doing, and then I wasn't doing the things that I should. I wasn't a great mom. I loved my kids! I did my very, very best, but I was under fire the entire time.

I had PTSD, and it is so hard to be an amazing, loving, caring, generous mom who really is acting in her children's best interest if you are continually under fire from the person who is supposed to be your partner. Having my children lined up in front of me and having them watch me be shamed, ridiculed, and mocked for things as simple as leaving a cabinet door open, I was scatterbrained at the time. I wasn't myself.

After divorce, of course there's a big process that you go through, but immediately when I got out of that environment and I had a separate home and a separate space, I was able to start rebuilding and rediscovering who I was as a person and becoming that woman I knew I wanted to be as a parent.

NATALIE: Right. When you are in that environment, you are literally being sucked dry daily. You are emotionally depleted. You are physically depleted. You are spiritually depleted. Then you are supposed to be giving. A parent needs to be on her "A" game giving to these kids who need her, and it's hard for her to be there.

When they are having a meltdown, she may be having an internal meltdown from an altercation with her husband earlier that day, and she's not in a place... That experience was my regular experience. For a lot of us, we homeschooled too on top of it, so we did not get any kind of alone time or break. If you're an introvert like I am, where you get your energy from some down time, I never got that. I was on duty all the time and I was exhausted on every different level all the time.

JENI: And life is a performance at that stage. You are on stage in front of your children, and if you love your kids, you are trying to make things look rosy and beautiful. But there is this internal conflict because you know that you're covering up. For years and years I was following the advice to "Always show your husband respect more than anything else. Never say anything bad about him."

While I agree that showing respect to any human, being respectful, is always appropriate, I took it to the extreme and pretended that things were different than they

really were. That internal conflict of the whole thing being a charade, even in the privacy of my own home with my own children, it was tearing me apart. It's hard to live a lie and never have a rest from the lie.

NATALIE: Yeah. Such a good point. So post-divorce, how do you feel your parenting has improved? What are some areas where you feel like it's easier and your kids are happier with you?

JENI: I used to parent a lot out of fear, which is understandable because I was in a very fear-driven place in my life. I was a fairly harsh disciplinarian. I was spanking on the first infraction and "delayed obedience is disobedience" and a lot of the things I learned from a lot of the parenting books I was reading.

Now my parenting has changed. Back then I had extremely obedient children, but there was no grace in my house. It was the law. We were living under the law. I always took refuge in the "law," the rules, as a child because I figured if I could just keep the rules, everything would be fine. I was kind of passing that on to my children, too. "You have to be good enough. You have to do this right. You have to make your bed when you first wake up in the morning – no if's, and's, or but's. You don't complain. If you follow everything to a tee, everything will be fine. But if not, I will redirect you." Do you know what I mean? I was a very law-based parent back then.

Since then, having experienced the beautiful freedom and the grace of God, especially since I've been divorced, I'm in a place where I'm safe now. I'm not constantly under fire. I'm safe. I have a lot of grace in my parenting. I no longer worry if my children are acting like children. It doesn't bother me. I think, "Oh, they are acting like children," and I can very easily work with, "Well, here are your choices and here are the consequences. I hope you'll make great choices today." I find it so much easier to have a positive attitude myself as a leader.

There's that saying that "The mother in the home should not be a thermometer; she should be the thermostat." I find it so much easier now to lead by example than I ever did before. Even the ability to coach my children through forgiveness, but at the same time to be drawing some strong boundaries around the way we treat other people.

My four children (the oldest is twelve and the youngest is four) and I in the last three years have had a lot of conversations. It's like a long ongoing conversation about kindness, generosity, and how we treat people. We don't call people names because it's not respectful. But those were messages I was not even free to communicate before because I was called names all the time in my house. So I felt like, in calling out those

behaviors in my children, I was dissing their dad because he did that all the time too.

NATALIE: Right, yeah. So much confusion.

JENI: Extreme confusion. You said something a minute ago, Natalie, that really struck me. You were talking about constantly pouring out. When you're in an abusive marriage, it's like even if you are meeting with God every morning and having quiet times like I was, even if you are going to church on Sundays to be filled up with God, there is somebody, your partner, who is systematically going around like with a drill and is drilling new holes in your vessel all the time so that no matter how much is poured in (and you're pouring out to children all the time because that's just the nature of the relationship)... but you also have somebody who is draining you dry. So you could pour and pour and pour to be filled in, but you could never catch up with the outflow because they are drilling holes in your vessel just as fast as you are pouring liquid in.

NATALIE: That's a great picture. To sum this up, I would say it's like an atmosphere of accusation and condemnation versus an atmosphere of grace. Women who are living in abuse, of course their atmosphere is complete and total accusation and condemnation all the time. They are living under that oppression. That just spills out then through us into the lives of everyone around us.

I just need to insert this here. When we hear about how marriage is supposed to be a picture of Christ and the church, Christ is not an accuser and condemner. He brings grace and peace and love. So a marriage with an abuser is actually a picture of Satan and the church. When you have that, that's going to spill over and poison the children of that union. So yes, one of the perks of divorce is getting your children to a place of safety. They can't be in that place all the time because you share custody most often, but they do have a place where they can see the difference. And you are getting yourself to that place too so that you can be a better parent. That feels good. What are some other perks that you came up with?

JENI: We talked about the atmosphere and the feeling of family in a home where you've left a toxic marriage, but also the physical space. I never realized until I had been divorced three or four weeks and I woke up one day and realized there was nothing on the walls. It was barren. I was living like a refugee. I didn't decorate anything. My personality was not welcomed, so any reflections of my style, my taste, or any reflections of me that were out there were completely rejected. I had a home that looked like anybody could have owned it. A college student could have owned it before they got around to putting up their posters. But I was telling myself this false narrative:

"There's a design gene, and I don't have it." I made lots of excuses for it.

But when I started tasting freedom from abuse, suddenly I started to get sparks of inspiration in Michaels. I'd think, "I want to buy that painting because I really like it, and I want to put it on my wall because it will make me happy. It will make my home nice." Fast forward three to three and a half years, I love my home. My home is now a haven. It's infused with positive messages and the colors that I love. It feels, just the physical space, like a home now. I don't know if all women experience this, but I know that because I was not approved (I stood under judgment all the time), I wasn't allowed and didn't feel the personal permission to express myself creatively.

NATALIE: Yeah, I can totally relate to that. I have talked to many women, even you, Jeni, you've seen in the private Facebook groups we've been involved in, where women will post pictures of their homes after they are out of their relationship. They will do the before and the after, and it's amazing. It is exactly that. It's an expression of who you are, and because you are not allowed to show up in that relationship, or in a lot of cases were not allowed to spend the money on those kinds of things...

There are different levels of financial abuse, but there is a lot of controlling of the finances in these relationships. So if you go out and spend money on something like a picture for the wall, you know that there's going to be hell to pay when you get home, even if it's just sideways glances or negative comments like, "You didn't have permission for that. That's not my taste. Why are you putting that on the wall? I don't like that. It's ugly." It's not even worth it. You get to the point where you just don't want to go there.

One of my tricks was that I would ask my mom for something for my birthday or for Christmas that I could use to decorate my home with. Then I didn't have to worry about the kickback, because my mom gave it to me. That was how I slowly tried to decorate my house. But if you look at my house now compared to the house that I lived in before, there is no comparison.

JENI: The first thing that I did when I got divorced was to spend about \$500, which I barely had, and we probably ate rice and beans for two weeks to make this happen. But I painted my room. I moved my room. I didn't want to have the memories anymore. I stayed in the same house for a period of time that we had lived in together. I had so many horrible memories, especially of my bed and my bedroom. I did not want to live in that room anymore. So I switched furniture between the rooms. I moved into what had been the office and moved the office into my old bedroom, and I painted the walls the color I chose. I bought two new night tables that I put beside my bed, and I bought myself a bed spread. I made myself a sanctuary, a place where I felt good going to sleep

there and I felt good waking up there.

NATALIE: You know, that's a really good idea. If there is anyone listening who is in a place where they are not able to get a divorce at this time and they need to somehow make it work in the relationship for whatever reason, if you can rearrange things and get yourself a space in your home that is just yours and make it yours. That helps. It's very healing. You can go there to pray. You can make it your bedroom. You can make it the place where you go and exercise. But that is your sacred space. Now, some abusive relationships will not allow for that. Everyone's abuser is different. Mine would have let me do that. He wouldn't have liked it, but I wasn't getting beat up for doing things. I would have had negativity on his part, but it was all covert and subtle.

JENI: But even a closet. If J.K. Rowling wrote her first couple of Harry Potter books in a closet while her baby was sleeping in the bedroom, you can take a tiny little closet and make it yours. It doesn't have to be as grandiose and extreme as decorating your bedroom. It could be something tiny. The thing is to be able to create a space where you feel good, because that's part of being able to plug up these holes that have been drilled in your vessel. It's a place where you can go, and the environment helps pour into you. You know what this is reminding me of? We are talking about physical space, but I'd say clothing is part of this as well.

NATALIE: Oh, yes.

JENI: You've told me a story before about your first experience once you were remarried and you went out and bought clothes. I'd love to hear that story again.

NATALIE: Well, I remember even before I was divorced, we had just separated, and I had never really... When it comes to dressing, I'm not very good at it. I just never had the time, and I hate shopping. I actually paid someone to come into my home and go through my closet. I had my own business at the time. (I was going to mention this later, but I'll put it in now.) One of my perks was that even though I had my own business while I was married, I still didn't have control of the finances. I could spend money on the kids for homeschooling materials and clothing. I could contribute to paying off the house. I could buy my husband a car. But I wasn't allowed to go on a shopping spree for myself.

JENI: You had an allowance, right? You had some fairly uptight financial abuse. You had like, \$25 a month that you could spend on make-up and feminine products and stuff like that?

NATALIE: It was \$50 a month, yeah. So I decided to pay this professional who came in and redid my closet. She showed me that my closet was basically black and gray. I hadn't noticed that, but that's how I was dressing. No colors. She took me shopping and showed me where to shop, what kinds of things would fit my body type, and all that type of stuff. I bought some clothes then and started dressing a little differently.

My husband was not living in our house at the time – no, actually, I think he still was. We were physically separated in our home for a year before we really separated. I think that was when he was still living there, I can't remember. But he was not happy about that.

In my past life, if I went shopping... Oh, I must tell you this story. My mother took my sisters and I on a shopping spree for my sister's 40th birthday. She gave us each \$1,000 to spend. We went to the Mall of America, and we each spent \$1,000. I bought practical things. I needed a pair of winter boots. I needed a winter coat – all these things I needed. But when I brought them home, I was so nervous coming in the door. Sure enough, my husband was upset that I had all these things. He thought I should have put it in savings or used it for something different. He was not happy that I used it for a winter coat and that kind of thing. That's an example of what my life was before.

Recently I went shopping. Even though I'm out and I'm remarried, I'm still paranoid about shopping for myself. I went shopping and I blew \$500 on clothes because my wardrobe basically sucks. I decided I was going to buy clothes I actually liked instead of bargains. I was going to buy beautiful clothes.

JENI: It feels good. (I have to interject.) People who think they hate shopping may discover after they are out that they don't actually... They hate shopping with the restraints that they had or the consequences of shopping that they had to deal with before. But it's fun to spend money and look the way you want to look. It's really fun!

NATALIE: Right, and obviously we must live within our budget. But I had sold my business and had some finances I could do that with. Anyway, I came home and even when I was driving into the driveway, my instinct was to hide my bags and not show my husband, Tom. (He's an amazing man. He would never criticize me for anything.) That was my knee-jerk reaction from living with this other situation for twenty-five years.

I came in and my husband said to me, "Did you go shopping?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "No way! Show me what you got! I'm so excited!" He was so excited to see the things that I had purchased, excited to see them on me, excited that I got to do it, and proud of me for actually going out and doing it, because he knew it was not the kind of thing

that I am prone to do. It was just such a healing experience for me and very mind-blowing. For me, one of my perks is the financial freedom that I have to work a full-time job and not be afraid, nervous, or feel guilty for spending money on myself or buying something for my home.

JENI: I've had the same experience. In fact, one that sticks in my memory... It was past the point of no return with my ex-husband. We were in the process of divorce. He was in the house over Christmas, and he looked at me and said with rancor, "You better not be going out and getting all pretty now." That is so twisted, right? He's both calling me ugly or homely or something and saying I don't dress well, but he's also saying... It was the control thing. He did not want me looking nice now that I was divorcing him. It was like a blow to him.

But I had the same experience as you when I went out and bought clothes for a trip that I was taking recently. I've been dating the same man for a year and a half now. I got to do a little fashion show for him. I would come out of the bathroom dressed in something new, and he was just sitting there adoring me and celebrating the fact that I looked so nice, that I was so happy, and that I wore things that made me feel good. He celebrated me.

NATALIE: Yes. You see, women blossom under the love of a man. That's beautiful. Did you have any other perks that you wanted to share?

JENI: I do. Friendships are different from what we've talked about so far. In this world of "Christian" falseness where you are trying to only honor your husband, I had so many walls inside my close female relationships. I've never had a ton of friends, but I've always been the kind of person who, if I had one to three really good friends, I was great. I didn't need a lot of friends.

But even my very closest friend, who I had known for two years, had no idea what was happening in my marriage. Sometimes when she saw me, she could tell that there was something wrong. But I would only ever hint at things because I wanted to maintain this air of perfection from the outside. I didn't even want to admit I had a miserable marriage to myself, much less say that in front of a friend.

So even with my closest friendships there was no transparency. I had this wall that I had built around myself and my personal life, and not even my closest friends could get through it. They didn't even know that there was anything inside the wall. They didn't know there was a wall.

But since then I have become such a transparent person, and with my closest friends I can share my ugly and my mistakes. My closest friends know lots of stories about the things that happened in my ugly marriage. It's not that I dwell in ugliness, but my friends are there to celebrate with me when things are good and to cry with me when things aren't good. The relationships I have now are authentic relationships.

NATALIE: There's kind of a theme running through this whole podcast episode. It is that when you are free, you are free to be you. You are comfortable in your own skin. You are free to discover. God created you, Jeni, and everyone else. He created you unique and special, and abuse destroys that creation. Coming out of abuse allows that creation to be reborn again and to blossom again. That pleases our Creator.

JENI: I also think a piece of that is that God made us to live in community with other people, and Satan is the accuser. Satan is the one who wants to ostracize and to remove us from real, authentic love, forgiveness, and happiness. By being able to have these more transparent relationships, it really is a place where through my friends I feel the love and grace of God now. I may have been projecting that onto these past friendships where I did not let that wall down at all, but I always felt a little air of condemnation. I couldn't even share my own mistakes because I was afraid of judgment. So being free in my personal life, being free from abuse, has opened me up to like myself and to accept the ugly, because everybody has some ugly.

NATALIE: Exactly. The good and the bad together. Another note on that vein is that abuse neutralizes our power as Christians. Freedom empowers us to be all that God created us to be and to fulfill the destiny that He created us for. Satan doesn't want that to happen.

JENI: Yes, and along those lines, and this is probably my final real perk, it's an open relationship with God now. I've been a believer since I was eleven years old, but it was this law following... I was definitely saved. The fruits of the Spirit were there. I was passionate about Christ when I was a teenager. But I would say that at the end of my marriage I was at the point where I was this close to becoming a deist, believing that God had created the world and set it spinning in motion and then had backed off to watch. He wasn't involved daily in my life, and I could never feel His presence. Sometimes when the music was powerful at church, I would have a sense of God in that building there.

But as far as my personal life, I was so afraid of breaking the rules. I poured over scripture to see if this was even abuse. When I left, I wasn't 100% sure. I did not really know, but I knew that I couldn't lie that way anymore. I finally came to a place of such

brokenness where I said, "God loves me, and even if this is the biggest mistake of my life, even if divorcing is against God's will, even if I'm making Him angry by divorcing, I have to trust that He will still be there." On a basic level, I could not feel it. I couldn't feel it at all. But with head knowledge I knew enough about God to know that He is a Redeemer and that He would be with me afterwards. I had no hope of ever being remarried, of ever dating anybody, or of having any kind of feeling of personal love from another person.

You remember, Natalie, because I've known you for a while now. But it was probably in the few weeks after I filed for divorce, after I found a lawyer and got the initial paperwork started, that the Holy Spirit started becoming vivid to me. I would get random encouragement and text messages from people that I didn't even know with the same exact scripture that I had read that morning in my quiet time. I started feeling urges from the Holy Spirit to do good – to do good in specific cases. I would see a need and think, "Okay, God. That sounds like fun. Let's do this thing," and just be overwhelmingly blessed with joy in doing the things that the Holy Spirit had been nudging me to do.

I went from this place, like in "The Wizard of Oz" where the whole first section is in black and white, dust bowl Kansas with the tornado coming, to Technicolor. My spiritual experience with God – I was saved at eleven, but I had a growth spurt. I shot up to where I could feel God's sunshine. I'm thinking of breaking through a forest canopy, like in the really deep, dark, dense jungle, and suddenly breaking through the top of the forest canopy and feeling sunshine on me.

NATALIE: That's a great picture.

JENI: And the fresh air, it was like being reborn. It was pretty dramatic. All of that happened in the space of a couple of weeks where suddenly I felt like I was not left behind, and I was on this adventure with God. There were definitely some huge, scary moments. There's been intimidation and some hard things that have come since then. But I finally felt like the hero of my own story, like I am on this journey and God is with me. He is right beside me. He is shining a flashlight, not as far in front of my feet as I would like, but He's shining a light on the next couple of steps in front of me, and He's with me.

I am excited about the future. I don't know what's happening next, but I now know, looking back through all the hell that I went through in my marriage and to get out of that marriage, that if He was with me in that then He is with me now. So my faith had a complete renovation through the process of getting divorced. I've had a lot of personal

and emotional growth, but spiritual growth as well.

NATALIE: That's amazing! I want to close by saying that a couple of hours ago I tweeted and asked any divorcees on Twitter if they wanted to share some of the perks that they have experienced being divorced. I wanted to read a few of their responses. These are just quick things that we won't talk about because we need to wrap this up.

One person said, "My sanity, peace, freedom, ability to pursue trauma therapy and healing, not needing to be hypervigilant, viewing the future with hope, feeling much better physically, spiritually, emotionally, and mentally, positive effect on children. It has been like coming back from the dead for me."

Another person said, "I have a new partner who came out of a narcissistic marriage too. We understand each other's histories and we know how to love each other excellently. Memories of my past are disappearing quickly, and I have a whole new life ahead of me at fifty." I've noticed an age... You're a lot younger, Jeni, but a lot of us just waited and now we're in our 50's and this is happening. But there is new life even in your 50s and 60s and 70s.

Another one said, "Slowly realizing the only negative voice, mood, or look comes from my cat, and she is easily soothed..."

JENI: That's my favorite!

NATALIE: "...Realizing people really do like me and I'm not an embarrassment or a social idiot. Making my own decisions without having to constantly contemplate what decision would make him happy, keep him happy, and not upset him. Always having to be on the alert."

Another one says, "Accomplishing things that he told me I was incapable of. Slowly losing his voice in my head and second-guessing everything I say and do."

I think we would have had a lot more. That was just two hours ago. Those were the answers that came in. I think a lot of listeners could chime in and give their own answers, and there are other listeners who are thinking. I hope this podcast gives you hope that if you did decide to pursue divorce that it wouldn't be the end of the world and your life as you know it would not end. Actually, it would end, but you would have a better life afterwards.

I don't want to give the impression that walking through divorce or life post-divorce is

all a bed of roses, because it is not. There's a lot of healing that must be done. This is a long process and it takes years. I'm just saying that for many of us, divorce has been a very healing experience in the long run, and it's been so much better than living in an abusive relationship for so many years. I want to say thank you, Jeni, for being with us today. I think this has been a great episode, and I think it's going to be really helpful for a lot of people. Thank you for putting some time, effort, and thought into this and for being with us.

JENI: Thank you, Natalie. You are a blessing. I am in the Flying Free Sisterhood group. It has been an honor to be ministered to in that group and to then be able, through my healing inside that group, to turn back around and minister to other people who are coming up behind me. It is such a cool place to be. I know you weren't asking for this, but I'm going to give a shameless plug, because you can go to counseling or therapy but it's not the same as just being with other women who will validate your story, who believe you, and who are there to celebrate and cry with you. Natalie, I have the utmost respect for all you have done to put that group together. I'd like to invite anybody to please join. It is a fantastic decision.

NATALIE: Thank you, Jeni. On that note, if you want to learn more you can go to my website, FlyingFreeNow.com. I'll give you the first chapter of my book for free if you sign up for my mailing list on the first page on my website.

If this podcast is talking about things that are of interest to you and are important to you and you know there are other people out there who need this kind of message, please share it. I got a message today that my podcast is going up in the rankings on Apple Podcasts. If you leave a rating there and give some words of encouragement as to why this podcast has meant something to you, that will help the podcast go up further in ratings, which will make it easier for people like you to find it. Thank you for joining us, and until next time, fly free!