

LEARNING TO LOVE THE BIBLE AGAIN AFTER YOU'VE BEEN SPIRITUALLY ABUSED

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 29 of the Flying Free Podcast. Today we're going to be having a conversation with Stacey Wynn. Stacey was a high-powered career woman who left the corporate world to go to seminary and help other abuse survivors. She is an abuse survivor, now divorced, and living with her daughter. Welcome, Stacey.

STACEY: Thank you. It's good to be here.

NATALIE: Thanks for being on the show. One of the challenges that abuse survivors face is healing from wounds that other Christians have inflicted on them using the Bible as a weapon and certain verses. In my book, "Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," I call it "Christian propaganda" – the propaganda machine that is used to keep women believing that it's okay that they are oppressed (and subjugated in some cases) and that it can be a thing that can bring glory to God. They stay stuck because of the way some of these verses have been interpreted or taught from the pulpit.

I haven't seen many abuse survivors that have given up on their faith, but I have... I just joined Twitter a couple of months ago. There is this whole segment of Christians (well, they aren't Christians anymore - they are called ex-vangelicals) who basically say, "If that's what the Bible says and that's who God is, then I don't want to have anything to do with it," and they've abandoned their faith.

I think there's a better option, a different option that I think is better. So what I've chosen and what most abuse survivors I've worked with have chosen to do is to go back to the Bible and say, "Does the Bible really say those things? Is God really that kind of a God? Maybe it's the people behind that message that were wrong, and maybe the message is actually this amazingly beautiful message that does have consistency throughout the whole Word of God and is something that is very beautiful for all human beings regardless of your gender, race, socio-economic status, or whatever else you compare it to." That's what we want to talk with you about, Stacey. I'm wondering firstly, how did you unravel this whole thing for yourself?

STACEY: I've been taking notes like a crazy person as you've been talking, because you are hitting on some really good topics. I would say overall that the issue we have as

women in abusive relationships is that we do not have a good view of relationship and are existing in a very rules-based atmosphere. A lot of times we are used to that kind of a thing and that concept of relationship and the heavy weight of maintaining a marriage has taken up most of our lives. As Christian women, we have our priorities mixed up when that happens, and our relationship with God tends to suffer amidst this failing and destructive marriage.

One of the things that I realized going through that myself is that I had misplaced my priorities and I was getting confused about verses, about what God had in store for me, and about what I was supposed to do as a Christian woman, because I didn't have Him in the first priority spot. The first thing, when that realization hit me, I knew the importance at that moment of digging into scripture and getting closer to Him. I think in order to get through those abusive situations or those trials in life, you have to build a very strong relationship with God and ask the Holy Spirit to enter into that mix as well. You need to strengthen your connection with Him.

That's what helps us gain the strength and the spiritual strength to get through, but it also does a few other things. Like you said, the spiritual abuse that we encounter and the clobber verses and just the confusion, and some of the things we've heard throughout our lives like "forgiving and forgetting" that we think... I thought that had to be scripturally based. I never assumed that forgetting was not part of forgiveness.

NATALIE: Even though it makes absolutely no sense.

STACEY: Exactly! But that's just one of those things that passed through one ear and out the other. I never thought much about it. When you are going through these very pivotal moments in life and trying to separate lies from truth and trying to gain strength to move forward, the only way to do that is to connect. The ex-vangelical movement is very fascinating to me. I follow all of that on Twitter too. I think what I've taken away from that is the importance of wrestling with your faith. I think it's absolutely important and critical.

But it's interesting to me that often you are seen as a heretic just for saying, "I'm questioning things," or "I'm wrestling with this issue." In reality, I think that's what we are called to do because we learn when we wrestle, we come face-to-face with God in those moments, and we're able to ask questions of Him. He knows everything that is going on in our hearts and minds. He knows when we doubt Him. He knows all the stuff about us.

I got to the point that I would just have very real conversations with Him. When I was

mad, I would tell Him I was mad. That sounds kind of silly, but in those moments, that's when we really are able to connect in a new way. He teaches us something new and He replaces lies with truth.

All of that is what helps us gain ground against the enemy. The enemy can be our husbands. The enemy can be people in church who are not telling us the truth and are not potentially filled with the Holy Spirit. It starts to give us discernment to be able to tell all these things: truth from lies, freedom from bondage, and all of that. Just in the first few minutes I think you hit on all the important things, and that is what I went through and am still going through. I hope I never stop.

NATALIE: Like you said, it would be nice to go through it knowing that having a thread of faith that believes and that can hang onto the idea that God loves us, because I think that's what women start to doubt. I've seen this in the ex-vangelical movement as well. People are so hurting. They are in so much pain, and they've lost their belief that God (some of them that God even exists at all) is involved and that He actually cares. Because if God cares... "Why would a God who cares enjoy watching me suffer in this marriage? And why would that bring Him pleasure and glory and honor?" It just doesn't make any logical sense.

STACEY: Yeah. "And why would He want me to stay in an abusive relationship, and what am I supposed to do when I lose my voice and I can't be myself around people that I go to church with? I can't even be truthful, and I have this façade. Why do these Christians around me not love me for who I am? Why can't they help me when I am in desperate need of help? How come when I ask for assistance from the church, I don't get it?"

All these things happen, and it's a lot to try to wrap your mind around. You can do two things: You can give up, or you can decide that you don't really know the truth, find out for yourself, and stop listening and believing everything that everyone else says. In the end, we each have a very personal relationship with Jesus. The answer that He gives me about my issues is not going to be the answer that He gives you. He's not a cookie cutter God. He's very personal.

NATALIE: Right! That's a really good point. We could talk a long time just about that. If God gives me direction in an area, then I can't say, "Now everyone else has to do the same thing." It's not like that. It's not wisdom. It's not love. You're right. That puts God in a box and says, basically, that "We've got God on a rope. Now we've captured His essence. We've got the infinity stone in our hands." (If you're into Marvel. I'm not, but I've watched enough of them to know what an infinity stone is.)

So you had this fascinating structure for tonight that I was really excited about that I think is genius. I was thinking about different kinds of people. Some survivors are still in the thick of it, and they can barely breathe. Like you, they aren't going to say, "I'm going to sign up for seminary to figure this out for myself." They just can't do that. They are barely making it through life.

You have some ideas for them for how they can actually study the Bible where they are at. Then you've got some ideas for the middle range, which would be those ready to dig a little bit deeper but don't know how. And then there are those, like you, who think, "I'm absolutely fascinated by this. I want to learn everything I can. I'd like to be a teacher someday. I'd like to make a difference in this world through my voice as I learn and grow in these areas." There's that level. Can you talk about those three levels and break those down for us?

STACEY: Sure. The very basic level, and this is where I started, is when you don't have much time or mental energy to put into it. I would encourage women to pick the best translation of the Bible (and I would advise the New Revised Standard Version or The Common English Bible – the NRSV and the CEB.) Those are very gender accurate, so you won't see a lot of "brothers" and "men" and terminology like that unless that is exactly what it is supposed to be. There are translation errors that I think can add to our confusion. Some versions are translated more properly than others.

Then there are some very easy things. Download the YouVersion Bible app. Find, out of the ten million Bible studies that they offer, just one. I looked for divorce studies or studies about fear or love or things like that. You can just broadly look for a study that applies to where you are. They range in time. There's no big commitment. Usually they are about five to seven days, or you can do just one verse a day. Just get started looking at verses. And sometimes you will read one and it will make such an impact on you that maybe you go back and read that one every day that week. Let the Holy Spirit guide you in that, and if something starts to pique your interest, journal about it. Write it down on your mirror with a dry erase marker. Start to look at scripture literally in your face in your bedroom or in your bathroom. The other basic thing that would be helpful is TheBibleProject.com. Have you ever seen any of their videos, Natalie?

NATALIE: I haven't, no.

STACEY: Okay. They are on YouTube. You can subscribe to them on YouTube, "The Bible Project," or go straight to their website. They have amazing short videos about all the books of the Bible and different topics. They do a wonderful job looking at some of the original language and describing what it meant then and how we should view it now.

The way they are recorded, they will hold your attention. They are all kind of cartoons. They are really great to watch, so I would encourage people that are just getting started and trying to build a habit to do some of those things. Get a good translation; download the YouVersion Bible app; and check out "The Bible Project." Any questions on basic?

NATALIE: No, that sounds... I was writing things down and I wrote CEB, the Common English Bible. What was the first one you said?

STACEY: New Revised Standard Version.

NATALIE: Okay.

STACEY: That's a good one. If you like to physically hold a Bible, they have a wonderful new study Bible out that's called the "NRSV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible," pretty recently published.

NATALIE: That's good to know, because I get that question a lot. People are always wondering. A lot of people from reformed circles use the ESV. That's where I came out of. They want to get out from there and get away from that and wonder... There's like five million versions out there. It's crazy! So this is great.

STACEY: There are. Intermediate, after you've been in that basic for a while, you may feel like you need to do a little bit more. One easy transition is to use the Blue Letter Bible. You can download that as an app or can use it on your computer. It is BlueLetterBible.org. What that does is allow you to start clicking on specific words and looking at the original language around those words. It allows you to pull up multiple translations and read the same verse in multiple translations. It allows you to start to do some basic research, but you'll be amazed at the amount of information you can see.

I always like to pick just a simple word like "faith." You can click on that word in English and it will take you to the Hebrew or the Greek and give you the opportunity to look at how that word might show up in other verses. You can start to get a really good idea about context and things like that. That is one great way to go. I've got it downloaded on my phone. I've got it on my computer, and it's a go-to for me.

NATALIE: I just downloaded it on my phone today, and I'm totally fascinated by it. I can't wait to use it.

STACEY: Good. The other source is Marg Mowczko. She is an amazing scholar. I would

love to just travel to Australia and meet her for coffee. It would be worth the trip, I think.

NATALIE: Yeah.

STACEY: Her site has some amazing content, especially for women for validation of what women did in the Bible and the vast amount of research material that is available to us to study, the things that we wonder about, those clobber verses, or anything we wonder about, and her current blogs are current issues. That's a great resource.

Then I wanted to mention getting a commentary. At this stage, in the intermediate stage, you may want more than just a Bible. You may want what is called a commentary, which gives commentary of each passage in the Bible. There are a ton of them out there. Some of them are really expensive, some of them are pretty reasonable. The reason you might want to pick a commentary is that you want to see some of the context and history of the passage you are reading. Also, you'll learn how verses in the New Testament tie to verses in the Old Testament and things like that.

When you start to do more research and you want a little bit more meat, I would suggest a commentary. I wanted to mention Deborah, the story in Judges 4 and 5. There is a vast difference in commentaries. If you look at a commentary like John MacArthur's, "MacArthur Bible Commentary," he talks about the fact that her rise is an exception as a woman in the Bible because of a man's failure, Barak's failure. So in his commentary, this is what he says... And "The Oxford Bible Commentary" actually gives (because what he says in my humble opinion is very opinionated – there aren't many facts, and if you know about him that might make sense) information about what her name means, about the fact that she was a mediator between God and Israel, that the reason Barak asked her to go into battle with him was because of her status as a leader and because she was a judge and leader in Israel and that was normal for that position. "The Oxford Bible Commentary" is one that I would suggest adding to your library.

NATALIE: Yeah, I was going to ask what you recommended for commentaries.

STACEY: Then advanced. So if you get through basic and you get through intermediate and feel there's more you want to do, I have some suggestions, which are to go back and look at courses for Biblical Hebrew and Greek, the original languages. That might sound like a lot to chew, but there are great resources and lots of different price points. I took Biblical Hebrew from the Israeli Institute of Biblical Studies. I took about a year and a half of introductory Hebrew, and then in seminary I had to take Hebrew again.

ZondervanAcademic.com has some great manuals and videos, so you can basically teach yourself at your own pace. I can't tell you how much more passionate I became, not only in my personal relationship with God but just in studying and understanding scripture, by taking Hebrew. If you do happen to feel called to do that, I would definitely, whole-heartedly encourage you to.

NATALIE: I have a question. ZondervanAcademic.com, are those videos free, or do you pay to get access to those?

STACEY: You pay to get access to them. You can pay through their site, and it's also on Amazon. I know I have mine loaded on my Amazon Prime account and I can watch them on TV.

NATALIE: Fascinating! This is so intriguing to me.

STACEY: I did decide after going through the Hebrew courses, mid-way through, I felt a calling to do more than that, and I entered into seminary. I am about halfway through my master's and am taking it part-time, a couple of courses every eight weeks. I've learned a whole lot, and I've found that even the seminary that I've chosen is a Baptist seminary and in the SBC. So I went into this thinking I might encounter some opposition because I'm a woman. From the student base, I have absolutely not. One of all the professors I've had, I didn't have any direct confrontation with him, he just made his view very well known by linking us to his blog. It was very apparent what his view of women in ministry was.

I've chosen to get as much education out of the process as possible. I am always honest. I've always presented my testimony, not only coming out of abuse and how that factors into my spirituality and my growth as a Christian, but also how I feel led to be a leader as a woman in church. I've never hidden any of that in any of my writing assignments or anything, and I haven't encountered any issues.

NATALIE: Well, the tide is turning, I hope.

STACEY: I think so. I think it is. No matter what stage you are at – basic, intermediate, or advanced – the important thing to do is just to share your testimony and to ask God and the Holy Spirit to make Himself known, to put the people in your life that are going to be a good community for you, and to put someone in your life who is going to mentor you and who you can mentor. You are always on a spectrum. There are always going to be people who are ahead and people who are behind where you are in your faith walk. It's always important to be led by someone closer in relationship and also to

lead.

NATALIE: That's really good. Can you touch on church? For me, I don't even go to church anymore. That's not really how I want to be living my life right now. I would like to be going to church, but I'm so jaded by the church. I've had so many horrible experiences.

I've been married to my current husband for a year and a half, and we've visited so many different churches. We just can't find something that works for us. I'm not that picky of a person, but I am now. I go into church and I start to break out in hives. What do you suggest for people like me who are kind of floundering? I hope I'm not in this place for the rest of my life, but in the meantime, what do you think about that?

STACEY: I think it's important to find community. There are a lot of reasons why a church may not be a healthy one for you. I think you have to find a community that allows you to be yourself, because if there is one thing that we learn going through abusive relationships, it's that we have allowed ourselves to be hidden behind a façade for so long, and you have to live in truth. The more you do it the more you have to do it. I can't not be truthful, and I can't not speak my voice anymore. It's okay.

One of the big hurdles is that we feel that we can't ever change churches, and that's just not true. You can change churches. Churches are made of humans, and humanity is fallen. There's always going to be a problem with church because there are humans involved. But there is going to be a community where there are more healthy than unhealthy and where you feel like you can be a part of it. You have to do some research.

There's a site called ChurchClarity.org. That's a site that is being built, so as more churches start submitting their information, if you don't see a church on there, you can ask them to submit information to Church Clarity. This allows you to see positions on women and on LGBTQ. It links up to websites, so as you are researching churches in your area you can connect to the site and see exactly where they state their beliefs and know a little bit more about them before you go. If one of your main issues is that you are egalitarian or you believe that there is no difference between women and men as far as spiritual gifts, then you'll want to make sure that you go to a church that is egalitarian and does affirm women in leadership.

NATALIE: Oh, this is so good. I had no idea that was out there.

STACEY: Yes, it's a great resource. Then I would say that sometimes you are in a small town and you don't have many options. I think there are still lots of online options. You

can find some online church messages.

But what you are missing out on still is community. Even if you can't find a church you are comfortable in, I would encourage you to find a community that you are comfortable in. Even if you start with women that you can be very vulnerable with and accountable to, who have the same drive to pursue Jesus and you can do a study with, get together and share testimonies with, learn together, and just pray... Keep praying for community.

NATALIE: Right. It doesn't have to be this complex thing. I don't know where I read this, but they were talking about the idea that organized church and the whole church in a building thing is actually going away. People are starting to form communities in coffee shops on a Sunday morning to do Bible study, fellowship together, pray, and drink coffee. That resonates to me. I don't think I'm the only one. I think that resonates with a lot of people in our culture today. They really are looking for more authenticity. They're not looking to throw money at a program. They're looking to invest in time and relationships. When you think about it, that's what Jesus did.

STACEY: Yeah. We had a great conference. I have some amazing Christian friends here where I am, and we put on a women's conference last May. We encouraged women of all denominations in the city to come. We shared testimonies of very significant issues that aren't discussed often in church. To see what an impact it made told me two things. It told me exactly what you are saying: People really crave relationship. They aren't getting that level of discipleship where they are going to church. Churches are great, but there is something missing for women in particular.

It told me that, but it also reminded me and demonstrated to me the power of testimony. When you go to church, it's not like we are all sitting in a circle and sharing our testimonies. We go and hear a lesson, we say hi to some folks, and we go home. But that power of accountability and vulnerability and owning your story and what God did through your story; how He redeemed your pain, your grief, your bitterness, and your questions; how He showed up for you and continues to show up for you; those stories are so important.

When we make it through something like abuse, we just can't wring it out and walk away from it and leave it in the background. We have to keep it. It's our story and we have to tell other women and other people what that meant and what God did and praise Him for that.

NATALIE: Everyone's story is ongoing too. Our story is constantly in the process of being

written. We can be sharing our stories with each other as they are being written as well. I just read today (I read so many things from so many different places), it was from Rachel Held Evans: "Making space for each other, sitting with each other without judgment, letting each other share our stories and pray for each other rather than give object lessons or morality lessons to one another..."

STACEY: Not feeling like you have to have an answer. You don't have an answer a lot of times, but you can stand alongside with that person and join them in their prayer and in their pain without even saying a word sometimes. It's powerful. As women, we're so good at connecting and we're so good at relating. That's some of that gift, that nurturing and affirmation, that we bring. Trying to strengthen and build up others is what we need to get back to.

NATALIE: Yes. This has been a wonderful conversation. Is there anything else that you wanted to share with the listeners before we close?

STACEY: I just want to encourage you all to spend some time journaling with God. Put all the tough questions in front of Him, because He can handle it. There is nothing that is more powerful than Him. None of our situations are more than He can handle. He is going to meet you in the midst of anything. You just have to ask for His eyes, His heart, and His hearing. Ask for all of that so you can see Him move in your situations. Find someone, even if it's just one person, that you can be real with, honest with, and vulnerable with. Someone who will agree to walk alongside you in this journey.

NATALIE: That's beautiful! If you are listening to this podcast and you want to find Stacey, you can actually find her on her own podcast. It's called "Clarity Unleashed!" You can find that on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or whatever app you use to listen to your podcasts.

You can also learn more at Flyingfreenow.com. That's my website. I will give you the first chapters of my book, "Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage," for free if you sign up on the first page of my website. Otherwise, that's it for today. Thank you again so much, Stacey, for joining us.

STACEY: Thank you, Natalie, especially for being a part of my testimony.

NATALIE: Well, that has been an honor. For those of you who don't know, Stacey and I have known each other for a couple of years now. I've watched her completely blossom, and I've learned so much from her as well. It's been a joy to have a relationship with you for the last two years. I think it will continue to grow, and I'm

excited to see what God does in your life, Stacey, and where He is launching you.

STACEY: Thank you.

NATALIE: For the rest of you, until next time, fly free!