

## READING THE BIBLE AS A SURVIVOR

NATALIE: Welcome to episode 313 of the Flying Free podcast. Today we have with us author Liz Charlotte Grant. She is an award winning essayist whose first book was just released in January. Her book is called *Knock at the Sky* and it answers questions that many of our listeners who have been in the process of deconstruction might be asking. So questions like, What if I don't believe in the literal interpretations of the Bible that I was taught as a child anymore?

How do I read the Bible with fresh eyes? Is the Bible still sacred even though it was used to abuse me and or others I love? And what does Bible study look like once I discover that there were errors and discrepancies in the versions that I've grown up with? So if you are someone like me who grew up reading the Bible every year, going to Bible school, doing dozens of Bible studies and reading hundreds of books about the Bible, and you're questioning some of the things that you just bought into without thinking because it was the water that you were swimming in at the time.

And if you wish, that you could find a new way of relating to and studying and loving the Bible again, then you are going to appreciate our conversation with Liz today. So Liz, I just want to warmly welcome you to the Flying Free podcast.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Thank you, Natalie. It's so fun to be here with you.

NATALIE: So I think we should start with, just so that our listeners can get to know you, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how your own personal faith journey has informed how you now read the Bible?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Sure. So I live in Denver, Colorado, actually outside of Denver with my husband. We've been married for 14 years going on 15.

NATALIE: Okay. That's a good stint.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: It's a good stint. Yep. Long enough to fight about everything, but still work through it.

NATALIE: Nice.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: We're big believers in therapy. We have two kids. 10 and 12. And we have a backyard full of chickens, actually hens. So we have about nine or maybe eight now. Whoops. It gives you a sense of what it's like to own chickens, right? We have eight

chickens. So we kind of live in the suburbs of Denver, but I grew up. Do eggs every morning? We get fresh eggs. We get fresh eggs. It is a delight. Yes. And there are all sorts of colors and the richest creamiest yolks you've ever had.

Wow. So we feel very rich in yolk. Yeah. So we live there. I have been a Christian since I was about, you know, four years old, grew up white American evangelical, have been believing and talking about Jesus since then, you know, just in churches. I talk about, I kind of grew up in a like Bill Heibel's version of evangelicalism, so kind of a seeker sensitive, youth group heavy, sort of, sort of community, and we didn't belong to a denomination, we just were kind of a non denom floating somewhere on the East Coast, And I really did not learn the word evangelical for a long time.

I went to an evangelical university and that was when I first heard the word in a theology class. So it wasn't a super intellectual theological upbringing, but I was always very interested and very earnest about faith. And so I did all the, you know, women's Bible studies and the, you know, like I was volunteering with the youth group.

I had a flowery prayer journal that I would fill up and pray for my friends who I thought weren't as smart as me or as good. Yeah, right, right, right. I was the good one, except when I was feeling really terrible about myself for forgetting to show up for personal Bible study time. So I actually have pages and pages of, oh, daddy, God, I am so sorry that I haven't talked to you in a whole week.

I can't believe, you know, just castigating myself for being tired, for being a teenager, for being human. And that was kind of my experience of evangelicalism was like, it was a lot of kind of self effort. It was like a lot of. I think trying to make myself fit into a particular role. I am a free spirit artist type.

Like I, you know, I have rhythms that I do and repeat, but I am not very good at waking up at 6 30 in the morning and doing a half hour of Bible study and BSF filling in the answers. I have never been that girl. Right. And so I think I did not fit very well into those boxes, but when I got to university, I ended up studying creative writing.

I am a creative writer. So I wrote this book about the Bible called knock at the sky recently that came out, but I am not a theologian. I'm a creative writer. So I come at it from that angle.

NATALIE: Can I just jump in here and say something too? Cause I read your book. I have it right here if you're watching on YouTube. And you can see I've got lots of, I don't know if you can see that, but you can see where I've got lots of pages, like, and lots of

highlights. And the reason is because I was telling Liz right before we started, I really love good writing. I love, like, if I can read a sentence or a two sentence phrase that is just beautiful and artistic, it just delights me so much.

I'll underline it, even if it doesn't have any personal meaning to me. If it is a beautifully written phrase, I love it. And she has a ton of those in her book. So when you say, Liz, that you're a creative writer, whatever you learned in college and whatever you have practiced, I know writing takes a lot of practice, too.

You have to write a lot to be a good writer. And you're an essayist, so you have had a lot of practice with this. And this is your first book, as I understand it. Your very first book. So it's, it's a very, very good book. And I want to congratulate you on your first book. It's a work of art. And I don't think I've ever read anything quite like it that just looks at one book of the Bible and your whole, well, we're going to get into this, but, and maybe you were actually going there. So I don't mean to interrupt you, but.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: No, please keep going. Keep it coming.

NATALIE: But I just really appreciated the content. I appreciated the style. I appreciated how you wove in history and other stories. And then you creatively put all of it together into this kaleidoscope of not kaleidoscope. That's the, that's not the right word.

That's the word I use for my community. It means a flock of butterflies. I don't know if you knew that. Yeah. That's beautiful. What I meant was a collage. That's what I meant to call it. It's like a collage of beautiful things that come together. And actually, I think different people will put it together in different ways, which also makes it very artsy when you think

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Thank you. That is such high praise. That's very sweet and kind. Thank you.

NATALIE: I feel like Erdman's usually, Erdman's is a great publishing company. They're the best. They publish high quality stuff.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. Mm hmm. High quality stuff. Yep. Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, I think that's one of the things that it took me a long time to kind of figure out that I was creative. I grew up in my family, it was a dysfunctional environment and I have learned in the course of many years of going to therapy myself that often folks who grew up with any sort of kind of abuse or dysfunction. Believe themselves not to be imaginative or creative. And I had this sense of myself before I went to college, actually, that I was

not really creative.

Like, I think a big part of that was, I think I believed I needed to be so grown up, you know, I had to grow up before my time. And so it has been really sweet in these, you know, I'm in my late thirties now, but. In the years since college to realize just how wrong I was about that. Yeah, yeah. How weird and creative I really am.

NATALIE: That is awesome. Did you ever think of creativity or being a free spirit as being like a child thing, like a childish thing? Because when you mentioned that you felt like you had to be a grown up, I can see how that would maybe cause you to set aside that part of you.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. I think one of the things that has been really important to me, so I continue to be a Christian, but I am now sort of more in a mainline tradition. And I know a lot of folks go through kind of deconstruction or faith changes, whatever they want to call it. I mean, there's, you know, there's tons of ways. Some people feel comfortable with some things. I think for me, it was a combination of some spiritual abuse and some dysfunction in my family that really caused me to have some faith changes.

And I think it's funny because I never had the sort of questions that are these big philosophical questions like, you know, I wondered about suffering, but I was okay with it. I'm okay with that kind of gray space. I think for me, the thing that caused me to sort of have faith shift over time was more about how people really treat each other.

on the ground. Like what does it look like for Christians to live like Christians? You know, how does Jesus actually treat people? And witnessing so much abuse at church, abuse in families who are Christian, I think That was really disillusioning for me. And that led, I think, to kind of major foundational shifts for me and how I started to view faith, how I started to view the Bible, how I started to view Jesus.

You know, I don't see. Jesus participating in those sorts of kind of power struggles that we see so often in kind of church structures and family structures that causes so much hurt and pain. You know, Jesus intentionally is sidestepping that in the scriptures. Yes. And so for me, that has been really, really important to notice the way that Jesus intentionally makes space for other people.

You know, it's a, it's a large table. He is the leader and yet he is making space for so many others. He is the servant of all. He is the one who stands at the door and knocks. He lets us if we want, we cannot open the door.

NATALIE: That's right.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: And so the level of, and he's still there. He's still there. And you know, this is at the end of time, in the end of the story when Jesus is coming back and in victory and power. And yet he's standing at the door and knocking still.

NATALIE: Yes. I agree. Yeah, yeah, I agree. It is so hard to look at the word Christian, which implies, obviously, that you are a follower of Christ, and then to call behaviors that are completely the antithesis of what Christ taught and how he lived, call those behaviors Christian behaviors. It is mind blowing. And it does cause you to go, okay, what kind of theology then makes us comfortable with that? And do I really want to continue to buy into those narratives about what my faith is?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: It's so challenging because especially if you were like me and you grew up kind of in American evangelicalism, you're kind of fed this idea that there is like one story, there's one path, there's one interpretation, there's one way of living out.

NATALIE: And that's the right way.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: That's the right way. Everything else will send you to hell, right? So

NATALIE: That's on the slippery slope. Right. You could have followed God for so long, but then if you deviate slightly to the right or to the left Now you are on the slippery slope and it's all downhill from there, baby.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Right. And it's like, yeah, there's no agency once you get on the slope, right? Like you're just stuck in the roller coaster, right? You're going to head down the hill whether you want to or not. Yeah, exactly. I mean, not only is that false, let's just call that black and white thinking. That's what that is. But also, I mean, I think it discourages people from asking really important questions about themselves, about their lives, about their families, about, you know, all these things that we kind of construct our lives around.

These are foundational questions to how we do that. And so, you know, when you have an experience where you say, It used to be like this, and I used to believe this thing, and now I don't. There is a sense where it feels like, well, I guess I'm not that anymore. I guess I'm not Christian anymore. If I can't believe like that, if I can't live like that, if my family doesn't look like that.

You know, I know parents whose children have come out who have that experience, it's

very disorienting and they say, yes, my family looks like this. What does that mean about my faith, right? If I come out of an abusive marriage and I get divorced and now I'm divorced, what does that mean about my faith in Jesus?

You know, if my kid has a health emergency and God doesn't heal them or God, you know, we all have these things that happen and come up that are absolutely bewildering. You know, and they shake the kind of foundations of what we believe in and think we are. And I think that's really the place where I like to sit as a writer and as a human. You know, I used to be a birth doula, which is just right. Like that's a super informative moment. Oh, your face, Natalie. She's giving me this like shock and awe.

NATALIE: Well, it's because you still are just a different kind of a birth doula.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: That's what I mean. I feel like I take it with me just being able to walk with people at that formative moment when they become a family. Not that two people, partners cannot be a family by themselves. But I think there is something when you kind of step into a new identity as a mother, as a father. I think there is an element there of dramatic change that happens. I mean, this is even true biologically. I would often talk about the complex mix of hormones that happen, you know, it's just, it like changes our brains, you know, our brains are so changeable at that moment.

There's so much neuroplasticity. And so being able to. Walk with people in that moment. I mean, and, and just say, you're going to be a good mother. You're going to be a good father. Your baby is a good baby. You know, it felt like getting to like echo the divine back to them and just say, you know, God calls you good.

God calls this world good. God calls your family good. I still feel kind of that desire. I think returning to the scriptures. can so often feel traumatic for folks who have either been spiritually gaslit, or who have been bypassed, or who have experienced abuse with the scriptures, you know, spiritual abuse with the scriptures. And I think I have a particular burden that I feel. To be able to provide space for people to explore without judgment and without fearing that they can't get off the slippery slope.

NATALIE: Right. Exactly.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. They can walk down a path, right? Like consider this a hike without a map. I mean, that's sort of the spiritual life. You're just sort of heading out into the unknown. You know, no one has ever seen God. And yet we can see evidence. Right. of the spiritual world, of a world beyond us. And we get to encounter that as humans, you know. So I think a lot about writing this book was about taking back my

own spiritual agency and autonomy in approaching God and approaching the scriptures. And encouraging others to do the same.

NATALIE: Yeah. Yeah. Why did you call it Knock at the Sky?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Great question. I think my publisher is still asking that question. I think it's a great title.

NATALIE: It's very artistic. Yeah.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. I think it relates to this ask, seek, knock. Yeah. Injunctive from Jesus. We need to be asking. We need to be seeking and knocking. And that's when the door opens, right? I often think about that passage of Jesus knocking. I think that that is so indicative of the way that God comes to us. God does not typically force God's self on us. God makes space for us to explore and seek and ask questions and knock on doors. Yep. And I think I want people to understand that a question is not a threat. A question does not mean that you have lost faith. Right. And it doesn't mean that God has left you.

NATALIE: In fact, I think I would argue that a question shows your faith. It demonstrates your faith. So think about that imagery of knocking at the sky. You're asking, Hey, I have a question. Hey, I have things I don't understand. Help me understand. You don't see the Pharisees doing that. You don't see religious leaders doing that. When a victim comes to them and says, I've got serious problems in my relationship with my partner. You don't see spiritual leaders knocking at God's door and going, help me understand this so that I can help this family.

They already have all the answers. They don't need to knock at the sky. They don't need faith. They don't need help. And yet Jesus over and over said, it's the poor in spirit. It's the, those that are hungering and thirsting. It's the people who need me. They know they need God. Those are the people that God meets right where they're at.

And the other ones who already have all the answers. Jesus is actually calling them out in hopes that they would repent and just saying, you don't have the answers if you could only see what you look like. You look like a whitewashed tomb, but you're a full of dead men's bones. You have no idea. Knock it off.

So yeah, I love the imagery of this. It's beautiful. And I think you actually did that and showed that in your book. You showed this is not a book of answers. This is a book of questions and also wanderings and wonderings and beautiful thoughts and images and

stories. that reflect the heart of any genuine seeker, I think.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. Yeah. I have come to that same conclusion, sort of that curiosity is the most reverent stance we can take. Yes. Yes. That is where worship happens is with curiosity, openness, you know, a sense of humility. I had a friend who used to call Kids need machines. Okay. And in particular thinking about, you know, Jesus telling us to be like kids is like, well, what are kids like?

They're need machines. Right. And so there's a sense of, I think Jesus is calling us to that posture. I think one of the things that was fascinating to me too, about, you know, I wrote mostly about the book of Genesis, kind of the first two thirds of Genesis from the beginning of the cosmos being created with God's voice.

Through Jacob wrestling with the angel or God or whatever in the dirt. As I'm writing about this, one of the things I really tried to do was put myself into the position of sort of a first encounter with God, you know, someone who has not met God before. Because, you know, if we just kind of take the scriptures at their word and say, These people haven't heard from God before.

You know, Abraham hears a voice from the blue and then walks off into the desert with his whole family and leaves his family, his father, his religion, his culture, to go follow this deity that he's, Theoretically never met before. Yeah,

NATALIE: Yeah.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: And so it was important to me to try to encounter these characters as they encountered God. So with that sense of kind of wonder and surprise going, I don't really know who this deity is, but I'm going to respond in openness, you know, and there's a sense of in these early scriptures. of God kind of coming with questions too. Like there's a sense of God saying, will you follow? Like, will you build an ark?

Yeah. Will you follow me into the desert? Will you sacrifice your son? I mean, there's some wild passages here. And they don't have the end of the story, these characters. And so we kind of walk with them as they encounter this deity, kind of all the different angles of who God is and what God wants from humans. Yeah. And really they would have had this experience of kind of just sort of knocking. Who is this?

NATALIE: Yeah, I love how you brought the Jewish mid, is it Midrash? How do you say that? Midrash, yep. Midrash. You wove that throughout the whole book as well, and how they just wrestle with the words and they come up with all kinds of interesting



ideas and they're all okay with that.

They're all okay with these. And what about this idea? This could possibly be true and their theories, but they're okay with that. You know, these are ideas that we have. Some of them obviously I think are stand by them. They truly believe them, but others are open to those ideas and also open to what you bring to the table.

And I love that. I just think Gosh, that just adds a layer of depth, I think, to the Bible as well. And I think as evangelicals, we're afraid to do that. We're afraid that we're somehow blaspheming the Bible by, we don't have the answers. So it would make sense that we would come up with different ideas based on what we know about the character of God from other stories, or, you know, You know, there's so many different layers of things we can explore if we're willing to be open, but we're so closed.

We're like, well, my pastor said it means this. So therefore that's what it means. And end of story. Let's not talk about it. Let's just read it and fill in the blanks. Like you mentioned earlier, fill in the blanks of our Bible study. We know the answer has to be this. I remember one time in Sunday school when it dawned on me, I was just a kid and I was like, I would always be the first one to raise my hand to answer the question.

And I remember thinking, these are such dumb questions. Like we'd read the story of how Peter walked on the water and then the teacher would go, who walked on the water? And I'd be like, this is so stupid. How come I'm the only one raising my hand? Cause everyone was bored, you know, but I thought I was supposed to raise my hand and, you know, because someone asked a question.

So. It's like Peter walked on the water. Well, could we talk about like, is that it? Are we just like, how, why exactly? There's so many things we can talk about about that. Can people walk on the water now? That's what I was thinking. Can I walk on the water? How did that happen scientifically? Anyways, I love that you bring those ideas and stories in as well, because most of us have not been exposed to that.

So I'm wondering if you keep traumatic experiences with the Bible in mind, just being, you know, especially survivors who are listening to this, some of them have, because the people that they're around, or that maybe the communities that they're around, they already have the answers and their answers are, maybe not conducive to helping an abuse victim.

Maybe they're actually answers that actually condone abuse and actually encourage abuse in homes, depending on what your definition of abuse is. How do you suggest

that they approach the Bible? After experiencing the Bible being used against them in those ways. What are some tools that you would suggest for people who maybe have gotten away from the Bible because of that, but they actually would like to come back? Yeah. Yeah.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Well, first of all, I relate to those folks and I'm sorry you've had to go through that. The Bible should never have been used like that against you. I believe that that is heresy. Yes. So that is actually an abuse of even this beautiful work of art that God has given to us. I think it has helped me a lot to read different interpretations and to say, I'm allowed to kind of approach this text however I can, like whatever feels safe to me, I'm allowed to approach like that.

Like God does not demand a certain approach, I can approach kind of knowing that God is tender toward me and my pain. An example of this in the book, I write about Dr. Howard Thurman was sort of the mentor to Martin Luther King Jr. He is sort of a towering figure in civil rights theology. And his grandmother was enslaved in Florida to a sharecropper.

And during her enslavement, her master, and I say that in quotes, that was the title, Not the reality or not the ontological reality. Yes, exactly. He would not allow his slaves to worship on their own. Organizing was not allowed, even if it was worship. And so he would take them to his church and his pastor many times a year would preach from Paul.

The epistles, slaves obey your masters and would encourage them to obey with joy, despite the ill treatment and dehumanization they were experiencing. And she promised herself if she were ever freed, She promised herself that she would never again read the epistles. And for the rest of her life, she spent all of her time in the Psalms, in Isaiah, in the Prophets, and she never again read the epistles for the rest of her life after she was freed from slavery.

I think for me that was so inspiring to hear her story, the sort of agency again, kind of coming back to that idea, the spiritual agency to say, I believe, like I know who I am before God. I am a dearly loved child. My God is a good father and my good father gives me good gifts. And so if I am receiving this gift as harmful, as scary, as painful, as activating, whatever.

There are times when it's good to press into that activation, right? And say, what is that? And how can we heal that? And there are times to say, it's okay, take a break, you know, you don't have to read it like that. You don't even have to read that passage ever again.

I've started thinking of this as kind of like a survivor hermeneutic, like this is like a way to read the scriptures as a survivor to say, There are parts that just will not speak to me.

There are parts I will marginalize and there will be parts of the scriptures that I center. And I think being able to own your agency and say, God wants to give me good things. And if I receive this as a bad thing, I think I can trust God and kind of release that to God and say, I don't have the answer to that, but I also don't have to figure it out by myself.

NATALIE: Yeah. And we can do that more and more. When we recognize that there is so much we don't know, even though the Bible was given to us as a gift, there is so much that we don't know about it and about what it meant to the people that, and there's also so much that we do know that maybe we haven't been taught or we haven't learned yet because we don't know.

Our pastors or religious communities don't know about those things. My getting out and reading other people's perspectives and other people's interpretations, other Bible scholars, this isn't, you know, just random people from the street who said, you know, who just came up with their own ideas. These are people who study the Bible.

They've been to seminary and they have completely different takes on the same passages, but I didn't ever hear about those. I was told, don't read about those, you know, interesting. But now that I have read about those, now I can weigh out, well, which one of these interpretations actually reflects the heart of a loving God who cares about his creation, who cares about his sons and daughters.

Which one actually tells the truth that God is the God of love. And one interpretation might be aligned with that idea. And the other one might actually be aligned with really kind of a satanic version of the world. So anyway,

LIZ CHARLOTTE: And that takes discernment, of course, to like wade through and figure out where does it come from? But I love the idea of, and this is one reason I turned to the Midrash and And so much of the scholars I turned to were people of color, were people kind of outside of the U. S., were people, they were feminists, and they were liberatory theologians, and they were Black liberation theologians, and womanist theologians, disability theologians. My goal was to be broader. You know, I was like, I know, I know what the dead white guys think. I think there's a place for that. But I also, Want to know what the larger conversation is. Right. I think one of the fears within evangelicalism is like you bring in kind of the outsider and it like taints the whole thing.

It's like you, you know, the yeast spreads to the whole dough. the use of the Pharisees, you know, that parable. I think there's a fear of that. And I, and I think that has kept us really chained to one or two interpretations rather than saying, what across history have we believed about this very complex ancient masterwork of literature?

What have our ancestors really given us? What have we said about it? You know, what have all these people before us, this great cloud of witnesses, what have they said And for me, it felt really freeing to say there are so many tender and reverent and worshipful and scholarly voices to turn to. Who disagree?

They disagree with each other and that is okay. I mean, I think disagreement can feel so threatening and yet this is the story of faith that we've been handed. And so how do we deal with conflict? Do we do it by, you know, we just like shut the door and lock them out? Or do we sit down and really wrestle through what are these different versions and what can I learn from them?

NATALIE: Yes, I think it's only if we believe that there is a right way and a wrong way that then there's going to naturally be that fear if we think that the wrong way is going to infiltrate us and cause us to turn away from the right way. If we look at it like, if the Holy Spirit truly lives inside of us, then that Holy Spirit is working and bringing to light different, it's kind of like the story of the different people who were blind, but they're all touching a different part of an elephant.

There's a, they're from different cultures, different times, different times in history, different experiences, different families. They all are going to see God in a different way. And they're going to interpret stories in those different ways. And what if there's truth in all of those? And there's things we can learn from each other, rather than being afraid, which the Bible talks so much about, don't be afraid, just trust, just trust me.

If we're the ones completely responsible for the salvation of the world, then we should probably be really scared because it's just not working out. Not going well. Yeah. Going well. But if we can trust that God truly is in control, he truly does love this world, he truly is working in individuals and in us, then we don't have to be so scared to hear what someone else's story or interpretation is.

And we can find the nuggets of truth in it. I don't ever read any book anymore now. Now that I'm in my late fifties, every book I read, I'm like, I read through things and I'll think, That really resonates. This is what, how I think that resonates with my experience and what I've learned in the past, and I just feel deep in my soul that that resonates, right?

And then other things I'll think, Oh, that really does not resonate with anything that I've ever encountered. Could it be true? Maybe, but I personally am not at the place where I can accept that necessarily as truth. And then I just let it go. But it doesn't mean I'm not going to read that author. I've been reading some very crazy authors lately.

It doesn't mean I'm not going to read that author because like you said, I'm curious. I'm curious, where's God's wisdom, even in secular writers, where's God's, God's wisdom is everywhere, I believe, because God just inhabits this world. But okay, so in your new book, *Knock at the Sky*, you write about these Genesis characters that we learned about in Sunday school, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar are among them. How would you describe the way Christians typically tell their stories? And why do you take issue with the way that those stories are told?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Ah, Abraham is tough for me now. I think because I grew up in Sunday school and youth group. I know the father, Abraham.

NATALIE: Yeah, he was supposed to be a hero and amazing and awesome.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: He was. And instead, he is this kind of passive, I think abusive. Yeah.

NATALIE: Patriot. Selfish.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. He is a liar. And he takes a son to a mountaintop, right? I mean, I think there's a lot here that we have been unwilling to reckon with. Often I feel like the way that Leaders talk about Abraham as like a crisis management room.

When the like, the big leader at the front of the church has had some scandal happen, and they're going, how do we cover this up? How do we spin this? How do we, you know, and in fact, reading some of the commentators takes in history about Abraham. I mean, it's really absurd. It's things like, well, sure, he had sex with Hagar to have Ishmael, but Sarah suggested it.

So it's her fault. And also she couldn't have kids. So it was her fault. Or yeah, so maybe he did take her into his sheets. But he wasn't lustful at all. Yeah, it was pure. It was pure. And I'm like, yeah, to bring about whatever happened. God, right. Yeah. And it's like, well, no, actually he just didn't believe God.

I was like cataloging through this process of writing this book, all the ways in which Abraham fails, like he doesn't actually pray for his wife to be pregnant ever in the text. Actually, both of the other patriarchs do. We see these big scenes. where they come to

God and they're praying for their wives to have babies. And so even though their wives are infertile up to a certain point, God then answers their prayer. Abraham does not do that.

NATALIE: Yeah.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: In the whole time that Sarah is infertile.

NATALIE: And it comes back to that passiveness.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah. And then there are several times where he travels to Egypt, and he's traveling around in Canaan, and more important and powerful men come along, and he sort of gives Sarah away, and she becomes part of Pharaoh's harem at one point, she is kidnapped by a king at another point, and Abraham is fine with this.

He is passing his wife around in order to save his skin, mostly. And then we have this passage, I'll get to Hagar in a sec, but we have this passage where with Sodom and Gomorrah, he has this long dialogue with God. God tells him the plans about Sodom, you know, I've, I've heard this kind of evil outcry from the city.

I'm coming down to check it out before I do anything, but probably I will judge the city. And it's kind of clear what this means. Like God will send a fireball and like blow up the city kind of. And Abraham is happy to kind of go back and forth with God. Well, what if there's 45 righteous people? What about 10?

What about five? You know, he kind of goes down this list and this sort of philosophical discussion. And God says, okay, if there's five people, I will spare the city. Well, God doesn't spare the city, but also we see Abraham just walk off fine.

NATALIE: Yeah.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Abraham has had warning and does not go down to the city to say, repent. Yeah. He does not even go down to tell Lot, his nephew, that God will come and judge the city.

NATALIE: Yeah. Seriously. What is that about? I mean, the way it's taught, you think that he had all this compassion. He didn't. He just, he was so passive. He did nothing. He just had a conversation with God and then walked away. It is crazy when you stop and think about it.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: It is crazy. Yeah, he knew Lot was living there and did nothing to even tell Lot. So these have been really de emphasized from pulpits. And then, of course, we see his treatment of Hagar. He and his wife abuse their slave woman. She becomes a surrogate, which is a common practice during that time.

But when Hagar and Sarah, there's like infighting, Sarah actually comes to Abraham to say, what should I do? Kind of about this woman. He says, do whatever you want with her. And one of the things that I saw as I was kind of looking pretty closely at the passage is that Sarah and Abraham never use Hagar's name.

They never call her by name. The first to call Hagar by her name is the angel when she has run away from the family. So she really is about to die. Yeah. Yeah. Completely dehumanized in every way. And she basically is the first time she runs into the desert pregnant. And the assumption is she will die there.

She doesn't. God tells her to return, which is its own kind of mind blowing to return to slavery. And I get into that a lot in the book, because that was something that really, I felt an incoherence there and was going, what is, what is this? And then the last time though, Hagar is actually kicked out of the family.

the compound. And so Abraham sends her and Ishmael out of the compound with basically a tiny bag of food and water. And the assumption is they will die. Like the buzzards will eat them. And it says that Abraham is troubled. And then God comes to Abraham and says, don't worry, I will take care of Hagar. But Abraham doesn't come to God to talk about Hagar or his son.

And he doesn't fight for them to stay in the family either. And so the fact that they survive. is only because of God's mercy. It's nothing to do with Abraham. And then we see, we see Abraham take his son to the mountaintop to slaughter him. at God's command, which again, I spent time on that because that too, you know, there's incoherence there.

One of the things I sort of settled on was, I wonder why Abraham never told God he didn't want to do that. In fact, Abraham never says anything to God about the entire trial. So he never prays that God would relent. He never, Nothing. He just goes to the mountaintop, raises the knife, and only stops because there's a ram in the bush and an angel tells him to stop.

NATALIE: Yeah. Well, you, you touched on this too, because how I've come to believe, because I can, because you even talked about how we have permission to do this, but

How I've come to believe is that that was typical in tribal areas, you know, tribal gods would demand sacrifices, especially of your firstborn son or your first whatever.

And so human sacrifice was normal. So it's interesting that I think Abraham just jumped to that conclusion, but I don't know. I don't think that we know definitively that God actually was intending. In fact, I think the whole point of that story is to show, no, this God is different. This is not like the other tribal gods and you got it wrong.

And that's the point of the story. It's no, there's no sacrifices required. You don't have to give up your children to please God. So God provides, God is the one who provides the sacrifice, which is also completely on its head. The gods around, tribal gods, they weren't providing for their own sacrifice.

They demanded it from the people. So anyway, that's kind of how I think about that story. I just no longer believe that God would do that, or even to lead someone on in that way, because that's such a terrorizing thing. If God literally came down to me and told me that I had to, you know, murder my grandchildren, even if God never meant that, well, I was just kidding. I actually have something else on the side. Does that sound like Jesus Christ? Not really. So

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Yeah, yeah. I'm with you. I mean, I, that passage is so hard. And in fact, I've been on a couple of podcasts with atheist hosts, which has been fascinating. And a lot of them kind of settle in on that passage and kind of say, kind of, how do you defend God? I actually don't feel like I need to defend God because I don't know what is true about that or not, frankly. And so I often am like, you know. We have ideas. Yeah. Did it really happen? Did it not?

NATALIE: Those stories were passed down orally. How do we know like why certain parts were passed down of a story and how do we know that it was accurately passed down, accurate to the point, right?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Right. And kind of what, what even was the purpose for writing it down? So there's all these questions surrounding, you know, like, how did we receive this? What is exactly historically true? I don't spend a lot of time on that in the book. There are lots of great people who do, and I recommend you go find them as scholars. Yeah. I'm just a creative writer, so I, you know, but I think it was important to me to just say, I'm taking the story at face value in that I'm letting myself be swept along, kind of, in the flow of this story, you know, in the way that we kind of surrender to any story as a listener or a hearer or reader.



And so trying to figure it out on its own terms and say, what do I make of this within this text? That continues to be a troubling passage that I, I'm unclear what it's for. I agree with you. Yeah. Yeah. And that's okay. Yeah. I think it is.

NATALIE: All right. Well, I have one last question. So I've talked to many survivors who can no longer read the Bible. We kind of touched on this a little bit earlier. Yeah. And I actually took several years off of reading the Bible. I mean, I dabbled in it here and there just to try it out, to see if I could handle it. But part of me really wanted to see what my faith was all about without the Bible. Cause it was, the Bible was such an integral part of my faith.

It was really, my whole faith was really around the Bible. I wanted to even see like, what would my relationship with God mean? if I didn't have a Bible. And I was thinking, you know, there are people in history who didn't have a Bible and they had an amazing relationship with God. So I wonder what that would look like for me.

And I actually think that this time was really helpful for me in actually building my faith in God and my relationship with God, rather than relying or leaning so heavily into a book about God that had been interpreted and translated through a certain one specific lens. Alright, so anyway, now I'm getting back into it.

I'm actually going to be studying several books of the Bible in 2025 as my goal, and I'm alongside of members of my Flying Higher community. So can you tell us how you believe that it could actually be helpful and healing for survivors to maintain their study of the Bible if they want to, if they want to, you have permission to not as And what do you hope that they would gain by reading your take on the book of Genesis in your book, Knock at the Sky?

LIZ CHARLOTTE: I continue to see the Bible as very formative in my own life. These are the stories of my ancestors, like my spiritual ancestors. And so despite the fact that Bible verses have been used against me, I think many women experience that, frankly. Yeah. Especially many strong women, but you know, anybody who is abused in spiritual settings, I mean, that book is going to be weaponized, right? It's been a weapon in the culture wars against tons of people, even who are not Christian. And continues to be used like that, unfortunately, to our shame.

But I think one of the things that's been so interesting is starting to return to this book as really a work of art. To say, I am not exactly sure what everything means, and that's okay, I can sort of encounter God here because for some reason my ancestors, they copied this down by hand. They made paper by hand, they made writing utensils by

hand just to get this story to me.

NATALIE: Yes.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: So for whatever reason, this story has resonated across time. This grand narrative. And in fact, it's really a library. It's a compendium of stories about encounters with God and one group of people's particular encounters, you know, and there are ways in which that can feel scary because there isn't one right way. There isn't one voice. And yet I think there's a sense of kind of coming to terms with uncertainty in our own creativity and agency as we wrestle with this story.

The story continues to be my story. I mean, it really formed me. So I think for myself, it's been important to return and say, Listen, I believe in boundaries now. Is, are boundaries in bounds within the Bible? You know, what has God, oh, by the way, Genesis 1 is all about separation and individuation, right? And so kind of returning to these texts and saying, I see, now I see what was going on.

Maybe I missed it before, but this work, this really masterful work of art continues to speak. Like any art, you know, can lead us to God. I think there is inspiration here. I don't know how that works. Let's be honest. Nobody knows exactly how revelation in the Bible works, you know, like how does God speak?

We can't box it in, you know, but I think it is a beautiful tool that our ancestors have given us to kind of return And to try to meet God, you know, they have met God here. And so can we. So even if it's something, you know, I think I no longer believe in inerrancy because I think a lot of people were involved.

There are all sorts of kind of voices and, you know, and, and I just don't think that's the point. But I also think, you know, this is an artful and beautiful book and we don't have to discard it because people have used it poorly.

NATALIE: Yes. Thanks. I was just going to read a quote from your book, actually, because that touches on this. This is from chapter seven. It says, Much of our Bible reading today is a matter of judgment. Scholars must judge between the thousands of manuscripts, for example. the historicity of individual papers or the trustworthiness of particular scribes in order to create a translation. So there's a lot of layers of where they have to make decisions.

What about this? And then there's even layers to that decision about every little particular thing. That's not in her book. I just said that. Back to her book now. Preachers

then select among the abundance of translations in order to do the work of interpretation. And then readers decide how to apply the words to their own circumstances.

This entire process requires nuance, specificity, and humility to get right. And even when we try to find the one right reading, we often discover that a single way does not exist. For example, consider the question of the quote, original Bible. Is there an original manuscript, the first ever story of God written down?

And how would we tell if there were, Can we judge the trustworthiness of a manuscript by its age alone? And among manuscripts of equal trustworthiness, how do we parse the variations between trustworthy manuscripts to determine the most authentic word or phrase? What level of consensus between scholars and readers decides the truest to the original version of the Bible?

And then there's the issue of translated manuscripts. Translators and scholars seek to set down literally the words from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek into American English. Yet, to make these words legible to the average reader, they must also bridge time and culture. So, scholars must consider, how can a dead language be rendered into a living tongue?

Literalism only goes so far. What to do about idioms? Metaphors? Humor? How much interpretation has entered the translation to begin with? And what do we make of the vast disagreements of interpretation between even serious contemporary scholars engaged in parsing the nuances of these texts? Do you see how reading the text plainly, with that's in quotes, will not suffice to answer the complex questions of translation and interpretation.

So you can read that and go, Oh, well now that's terrifying because now all of a sudden you don't, now you're in an ocean where you can't see the shore on either side and a big tsunami is coming your way and you don't have an anchor or anything. But is that really true? I mean, that's if you think that your anchor is this book that's Passed down through all these people and translated and, you know, all of this, it's like a big mess.

I mean, it's not, it's amazing that it's not actually a mess, but it is in some ways, but what's our anchor? I think we should just close on that. Like, what is something that can anchor us in an ocean of uncertainty and mystery and the largeness of God, which cannot be contained, I believe in one book.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: I think our anchor is Jesus. It's the word. I mean, the word at the

beginning of the world. Yeah. The words that God used to make the world. I think it's Colossians 1 where it talks about Christ kind of keeping everything spinning like in motion, like I always think about Jesus being the mechanism that makes the world run, that makes the sunrise, that makes us breathe and you know, I mean, I just think one of the things that is so beautiful about art is that it kind of frees us from some of the confines of It allows us to think differently, to experience and feel differently.

And I know that it's scary. I know that certainty feels better. You know, I know it does. And in fact, you know, I've done a lot of work around the question of inerrancy and some of the scholars to have kind of been proponents of this and they want certainty too. I mean, that's really where it comes from. I get it. I think we want a place to stand. We want a firm foundation. And yet who is our firm foundation? What is our firm foundation? It isn't a single book, right? It is a person. Faith has always been about walking into the dark.

NATALIE: Yes.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: And I don't think that the Bible was meant to be, it was meant to be sort of a whole road for us. You know what I mean? It's a little bit like the searchlight, or maybe it's like the rope. I've heard people talk about, I had a pastor, Glenn Packiam, who used to talk about on his father in law's farm, in Iowa in the winter when it was blizzarding, they would tie a rope from the barn to the house so they wouldn't get lost.

Yeah. And I've started to think about the scriptures as sort of a through line maybe, you know, like I have this line that I can hold on to, but there's a whole big world too. And it's in the world, too. God is all around us. God is here. I believe in the Spirit of God. I believe in the Holy Spirit. This book is not the Holy Spirit. But it contains something of God. And how? I don't know. I mean, you know, you read that passage. It is entirely I don't settle it. I can't settle it. And I, I don't believe anybody can. Maybe if they tell you they are, they're selling you something.

NATALIE: Well, I agree. I think the ironic thing is that in, we're grasping for certainty to solve our fear because we think that if we're certain, then we won't have to be afraid, but that actually increases fear because then if you believe that there is only this certain thing and you get it wrong.

And that is honestly, that is the biggest question I hear from Christians. Well, I don't want to get it wrong. What if I'm wrong about whatever, that is tremendous fear, but what if, what if we're not supposed to get it right? What I'm just supposed to know that God says, fear not. For I am with you, even unto the end of the age. He's that rope

through the blizzard. Jesus Christ is that rope. You don't have to be afraid. You've always got that. You can always grab hold of that.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: I mean, I think it's worth asking, how does Jesus treat people who are wrong? Yes. Does he alienate them? Does he kick them out of the family? Nope.

NATALIE: Nope.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: There's space for the wrong people. You know, he welcomes them in. You're invited. I think it's important to kind of grasp onto that and say Nicodemus in the scriptures, he's wrong, right? Like Peter's wrong. Totally! Who isn't wrong, in fact? Like, I can't think of anybody. If Paul was wrong, all these people change their minds constantly, right? Even in coming to Christ. I think that is very freeing to say the way that God treats wrong people is to welcome them in. To say like, I will be your guide. I will be your guide. I will hold your hand.

NATALIE: Yep.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: And that does take faith and there is fear there. And yet that does not mean God is not with us.

NATALIE: That's right. Well, thank you so much, Liz, for sharing your time with us, for sharing your book with us, and I just wish you the best on your journey. Continued literary journey.

LIZ CHARLOTTE: Thank you so much. I wish the best to all you readers. You're such special people and may you find your spiritual autonomy.