

## SHAME BUSTING YOUR DIVORCE

*Hi. This is Natalie Hoffman of [Flyingfreenow.com](http://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 35 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today we are going to be talking again with Gretchen Baskerville, author of an upcoming book called "The Life-Saving Divorce." Gretchen was with us two episodes ago, Episode 33, where she talked about busting the myths of singleness.

Today we are going to be doing some more myth-busting. We are going to be talking about shame-busting your divorce. There are three particular tracks we are going to go down. One is the idea of moving from shame and fear to ministry. Many times, people who are divorced think they are disqualified from serving God. Is that really true? She's also going to share with us the latest outcomes for children of divorce. Finally, we are going to talk about the spiritual crisis that comes when you find yourself in a divorced situation. Where is God in divorce, and what is the outcome as far as finding a new partner? Are you disqualified from being happily married someday? So let's begin. Gretchen, welcome back to the Flying Free Podcast.

GRETCHEN: It's great to be with you again, Natalie.

NATALIE: Let's first talk about the way divorce affects the way we see ourselves. Some people think, often because they have heard it from their churches, that if they are divorced, they are not able to serve in certain ministries. They may, even if they go to a church that is more open to that, feel like they are disqualified from serving God. How do you move from shame and fear to a place where you feel you can have a ministry and be stable?

GRETCHEN: That's such a big problem, because we've been trained all our lives that marriage – being a wife and a mother – was the most important thing in our lives. To lose that in divorce suddenly puts us in this nether land. Who are we, and where do we fit in the church? Churches focus on the family, so what happens when we're no longer a husband, wife, and child/ren family anymore? You automatically start feeling like you are a second-class citizen and feel like you are disqualified, perhaps even from serving God. How would God use you anyway? Who is going to listen to you? You are the loser.

In some cases, churches want you to have this cheerful look on your face because you

are representing God, and you have to fake it. What I've discovered is that when you don't fake it, when you are real, you actually have better ministry than when you fake it, because people can tell when you are faking it.

NATALIE: Yes.

GRETCHEN: I started running this single mother's group at my church. This was way back in 1998. I realized that I had a very special ministry as a divorce survivor. I had "street cred." Other divorcees would listen to me in a way they would never listen to a pastor's wife or a women's director. They kind of tune them out, because "What would they know about divorce life? They've got great husbands. They've got nothing to say to me." But for someone who has walked through it and has walked in their shoes, I had a phenomenal ministry.

I think that your ministry starts immediately, informally, as soon as you have worked through the beginning of your hurt and your anger. You will find yourself talking to people in the grocery line. You'll find yourself talking to strangers, and low and behold, you will find that you are giving them encouragement as they walk through their own difficult divorce, especially if the person is being abused or is worried about taking that step.

You may have problems starting a ministry like this if you have a church that isn't open to it. You may end up having to switch churches. But you can also start a support group in your own home. I had several women from churches come to my single mother's group both when we met in churches and when we met in my house. I attracted women from all different churches. It's a wonderful opportunity to have a ministry that really no one else can do.

As I went through the next twenty years of being single, I found that being a second-class Christian gave me a better testimony, in a sense, because I could say that no matter what happened to me, I knew that God was with me. I knew that Jesus never left me or forsook me. In a sense, I was a better evangelist as a divorced person than I was as a married person. That was very special to me. I found that to be true over and over. Despite what we were told, people really don't identify with you if you are a squeaky-clean person. They want to see where God is when life is bleak, when there is a black cloud over your head, and when you question if anything good will ever happen in your life again.

Over time, I found that I developed a kind of reputation. "You can tell Gretchen anything. You can tell her whatever is going on in your life. She will be there to pray for

you, to give you God's promises, to walk alongside you, and she's not afraid of anything." I went from kind of being a second-class citizen to being a ministry leader even in my very, very conservative church. They started treating me with tremendous respect. I ended up being made a deaconess again and was put on a major committee at the church. So God has a way of taking us from having our nose dragged in the dirt to lifting us back to esteem. I can't explain how it works that way, but it just does.

NATALIE: That reminds me of the play "The Scarlet Letter" by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Have you ever read that?

GRETCHEN: Yeah, but it has been years. Remind me of the best parts.

NATALIE: It has been years for me too, but I remember she had the "A" on her and was labeled as this adulteress. But over the years, as she served people and did just what you were describing, they forgot why the "A" was there. I think at the end of the book it said that everyone thought it meant "Able" because she was so able. I thought that was beautiful.

GRETCHEN: Oh wow! Yeah. I think I was also known as the person who was not going to condemn you, because I've learned through doing years and years of divorce recovery ministry that people don't always tell me the worst things the first year or the second year. Sometimes I don't find out about the illegal and the felonies and things like that until their third year. If they are being beaten or they are married to someone who is molesting the children, I'm not going to find that out until a long time later.

I learned very quickly not to judge people. Don't jump to judgement, because a good Christian woman, or any woman of faith, really, is going to fall on her sword to protect her children's reputation and her own reputation. So I was the person they could count on to be non-judgemental. Obviously, it's not that I'm a big fan of frivolous divorces, the "I'm-bored" divorce, or "the-grass-is-greener" divorce. But where there is a really miserable marriage, where you are in a destructive relationship, I'm there and I'm with you. I will greet you with a hug, not an interrogation.

NATALIE: That's beautiful. This might be a good place for me to mention my book. I have a book called "Is it Me? Making Sense of Your Confusing Marriage: A Christian Woman's Guide to Hidden Emotional and Spiritual Abuse." I am right in the middle of working on a workbook that is designed for readers to work through individually to process all the information that is in my book. [The workbook is now available to the public. You can find it [HERE](#).] Also, it's going to have relaxation coloring pictures in it too, but that's not the meat and potatoes of it. It will also have group discussion

questions.

One of the reasons I wanted to do this, not only to help people process, is that I would love to see people taking that book and starting a small group, even just two to four people wherever you are in your community. As you were saying, you run into people in the grocery store. This doesn't have to be an organized church event. This can be something that you do on the ground level, an organic thing, where you are able to sit down with other women who are going through or have been through the same pain that you've gone through in order to love them, accept them, encourage them, and build them up.

That's what I was looking for when I was going through my mess. I was being rejected by everybody, and I was desperately needing connection with like-minded Christians who would support me no matter what. It is hard to find people like that when you are going through that hell.

GRETCHEN: It really is. If they don't have the maturity and they haven't walked that walk a long time, they may not know what to say and do.

NATALIE: Right. So that kind of thing. It doesn't have to be my book and my Bible study. It can be another book and another Bible study. I was going to ask you, what have you used all these years to take your women through? Do you go through different kinds of books, or is there another kind of curriculum that you use?

GRETCHEN: I've used a lot of different curriculum over the years. A lot of it depends on where the women are coming from. (I don't know if I'm allowed to give name brands.) I've used the major curriculum that churches use, but I find that it's best to use only in the cases of infidelity and sexual immorality because they do not accept abuse – either physical or mental abuse – as a valid reason for divorce. So I don't recommend using the big, major curriculum out there.

NATALIE: I think we can say the name of it, because otherwise people are going to wonder. It's okay. Is it "Divorce Care"? Is that what you are referring to?

GRETCHEN: Yeah, "Divorce Care." The other thing about "Divorce Care" is that they really insist that you put men and women together in the same group, and I think that's just... I understand why they want to do it that way, but it is destructive. It's bad because we all know that if you throw one good looking man in a group, suddenly the women change how they act, how they hold their bodies, what they are willing to say, what they are willing to admit, or be willing to discuss how depressed, helpless, or

hopeless they feel. Suddenly everything is put through the lens of, "Ooh, there's an eligible man sitting across the table from me." It kills any kind of authenticity and any kind of integrity there is in the group.

NATALIE: I was going to say that the other thing... We didn't have that in the church that I was excommunicated from, but the church that I started going to had that. I had considered going, but I found out that two of the men who abused people that I knew were going to that group. So there was no way that I was going to go to that group. I thought I didn't even want to go to a group that had any men, because I didn't like men at the time. I didn't trust them. I was scared of them. So I didn't even consider it. It was something I knew I wouldn't be able to do, which is kind of sad.

GRETCHEN: Let me be fair to the creator of "Divorce Care." His name is Steve Grissom. He really wants men to be involved so that women know that men can be victims of unfaithful wives. Men can be the victims of abusive wives. They are not always the perpetrator. I agree with him. I just don't think you can have men and women mixed in a sharing environment that is that vulnerable.

NATALIE: I also think it's true that men can be victims, and they are. I know some men who genuinely are victims. The thing is that you can have that knowledge without actually mixing them. That can be clearly communicated without mixing them. You could even start in a large group setting and then break it down into men and women. Or do they do that? Do they break them into small groups?

GRETCHEN: They only recommend that for the week that they talk about sexuality. I think that is a mistake. I think they need to separate men and women for every single week. Of course, their video portion of their curriculum is a full hour, so that doesn't allow most churches to give you time, if they are providing childcare... You don't have time for introductions. You don't have time for updates and sharing at the beginning. You don't have time for prayer requests at the end. So I'm just not a big fan. There have been times that I have used that curriculum and I broke it down into thirty-minute videos. I cut the videos in half, and I only used it with women. But that's not ideal.

What I found that I really love, especially for conservative women of faith, are the booklets by June Hunt. June Hunt is the radio host for Hope for the Heart. She has a wonderful booklet called "Verbal and Emotional Abuse," which, with a little creativity, you can break it down into a six or eight-week Bible study for women and use it for divorce recovery. She is wonderful because she has whole lists of different kinds of abusive behaviors. Women would go through these lists and say, "Yes, that's me! That happened to me! Oh my goodness, that was abusive!" They never realized it until they

saw June Hunt's wonderful lists in her little booklet, "Verbal and Emotional Abuse."

I used her "Hope for the Heart" series a lot for divorce recovery. That allowed me to change up the topics depending on what the women were facing. Also, she has, I believe, forty-eight topics in the series. So, unlike using a canned curriculum that ends at week eight or at week twelve, we ended up meeting year-round. There were always topics we could use from the "Hope for the Heart" series by June Hunt. You can get those off Amazon or Christianbook.com.

NATALIE: Well, let's shift gears. I know one of the biggest concerns that women have when they are contemplating divorce, or even after divorce, one of the biggest problems they have is dealing with parenting and children. A huge fear of mine and of many other women is that their children are going to be destroyed. Their children are going to go to "hell in a handbasket," as I heard once. I was afraid of that too. At the time of my separation, I had nine children ranging in ages from one to twenty. When the divorce was finalized, they were five to twenty-four. There were a lot of different reactions from a lot of different kids. There was some fallout. Tell me about what your experience with this is and some of the research that you have been doing on this.

GRETCHEN: Right. Because, of course, any loving mother is terrified, right? I was terrified that my kids would have life-long damage from the divorce. That's what I had always heard. But it turns out that now it is no longer true. On average, kids are just not as damaged as they used to be thirty years ago. I do know that there is research that says they are, but the new research is saying that if your kids were fine before the divorce, after a year or two they will go back to normal, provided that you can shield them from arguing and fighting with their dad.

If you must have an intense discussion with him, don't do it in front of the kids. Don't snip at each other in front of the kids. A lot of people now have non-disparagement clauses in their legal documents. Just keep the kids out of it! Keep them from having to witness any fighting between you and your ex. If you just act calm and polite and put on your happy face and a cooperative attitude when you are with your ex around your kids, that will really help.

I divorced when my kids were preschool aged, so I was watching like a hawk to see if the divorce would hurt them in any way. Between the two kids, I had one with ADHD and one with social anxiety. But I saw the seeds of those before the divorce, so the divorce didn't cause them. Eventually, both kids got good at dealing with their own issues, and they really matured.

One of the things that researchers say is that to be a good parent, you need to have a warm, close relationship with your kids. You need to have fun and do leisure activities outside the home. That might be going for a walk. It might be collecting flowers. It might be going on a nature hike. It might be going to the pet store and visiting the pets. Just do some fun things outside the house. Do projects inside the house. That might be homework. Then having fair and warm responses when there are crises. If there is a misbehavior, don't fall apart and lose it. Be warm and encouraging, but firm and fair with your discipline. Those are the kids who come out with flying colors after a divorce.

My daughter is over in the living room while I am sitting here talking with you. She is now an adult. I asked her, "How do you feel about being a child of divorce?" She said, "This is what I tell my friends all the time: I really feel fortunate. I would rather be brought up in a loving home with one healthy parent than in an unhappy, stressed-out home with two parents."

A couple of other things that research is now showing us is that kids are not more likely to do drugs and alcohol as teenagers if they are raised by a single mother than if they are raised in a two-parent home. Thirty years ago, it was clear that if your parents were divorced, you were likely to get divorced too, but that has really dropped. The latest study date on that is from 2016. Now kids from divorced homes are only a few percentage points more likely to get divorced than the average kid. For the average kid in a two-parent home, four out of ten are likely to get divorced. If they come from a single-mom home, five out of ten are likely to get divorced. That's only one kid out of ten, so that's not that big. It is far better to get kids out of high conflict homes, even if your home as a single mother is poor – you aren't able to offer as many nice things – it's still better for the kids to be out of the high conflict home.

NATALIE: Yes. Almost everybody that I've talked to that has younger kids – we're talking preschool to grade school kids – their kids have thrived when they are not spending as much time with dysfunction. They are protected from a lot of dysfunction when you get divorced, because now you are no longer in a dysfunctional relationship. The other thing that just struck me too while you were talking – we talk about divorce as if when there is a higher chance that the kids will get divorced then it seems like a bad thing. But here's the truth: What's bad is not divorce. What's bad is the dysfunction that causes the divorce in the first place.

I've told all of my kids now, if they find themselves married to someone who they met and married, not realizing what they were getting into, and after they are married they realize there is something deeply disturbing about this relationship and it's harmful to them, they need to not only get a divorce but to get a divorce as soon as possible, and

preferably before they have children. It's okay to say, "I made a mistake. I married someone who is hurting me." (I'm going off on a rabbit trail here.) Also, when you were talking about "Divorce Care," you mentioned that they only encourage divorce in cases of what? What were the two cases?

GRETCHEN: Infidelity and abandonment.

NATALIE: Okay. Infidelity and abandonment, but not physical abuse or mental abuse, correct?

GRETCHEN: Right. Yeah, if you look at their curriculum, that's what it says.

NATALIE: So the vast majority of the listeners of this podcast or the visitors to my website are women of faith in emotionally abusive relationships. Some also experience physical abuse and sexual abuse in their relationships, but most of them are experiencing a tremendous amount of emotional abuse. Those people in particular are stuck. I do know there are some churches, like my former church that excommunicated me, that would have been fine with me getting a divorce if I was presenting with bruises and black eyes, but because I was not, they basically told me that I was not being abused – that what I was experiencing was not abuse. It was a sin, then, for me to get divorced. So anyway, I don't recommend anything to my listeners that would cause them to feel that they must stay stuck in an abusive relationship just because a religious group says, "No, that's not abuse. You're not being abused." That is just more gaslighting.

GRETCHEN: Right, exactly. That's why my book is called "The Life-Saving Divorce." It refers to the forty percent of divorces that are for mental abuse, physical abuse, serial infidelity, sexual immorality, drug/alcohol/substance abuse, extreme neglect, and neglect of duty. There are people who decide, "I've married you, but now I'm going to put up my heels and you are going to have to earn the living, do everything, and take care of me." That's abusive too.

When I say that forty percent of divorces are life-saving divorces, that kind of implies that fifty or sixty percent are not. The researchers ask, "Are you bored in your marriage or miserable in your marriage?" The fifty or sixty percent of non-life-saving divorces are people who are just bored in their marriage. They didn't expect to have to wash those diapers and stay home at night. It's the forty percent where people are miserable every day. Their souls are being destroyed from being in this marriage. Those are the life-saving divorces. I'm completely with you. Just switch churches. If you go to a church that doesn't accept chronic mental abuse as a reason for divorce, it's time to switch, because



there are plenty of churches that do.

NATALIE: Right. Speaking of that, that's a great segue into our next and last thing we will talk about on this episode. That is the whole God thing. Because we are talking to women of faith, even those who have gotten divorced, there is this little nagging fear in the back of their mind saying, "Am I on God's plan B now? Does God still love me? Does He think that I'm a loser?" Also, they are wanting to be remarried, but they think, "Well, God will probably punish me now," or "I don't deserve to have any happiness in my life, so I will probably be single for the rest of my life." Can you speak into that a little bit?

GRETCHEN: Absolutely. Can I tell a little bit of my own story?

NATALIE: Yes, please.

GRETCHEN: This was really tough for me because I am a really loving, affectionate person from a very physically demonstrative family. I always loved sex, and I always wanted to remarry. In the earlier podcast, I talked about how I had decided to put off dating until my youngest child went off to college. That was fifteen years, so at year fifteen, I was ready to go. I thought God would provide someone for me instantly. It's so easy for us to jump right back into that formula thinking: "If I do A, B, and C, God is going to give me what I want." But God is not like that. It's a relationship. It's an adventure together with God. It's not like God is the great Coke machine in the sky. I had jumped right back into formula thinking. I literally expected that within six months of my youngest leaving home for college that God would drop a wonderful new husband in my lap.

Of course, we all know what happens next. God did not do that. For example, I discovered an old church friend was going through a divorce and I got my hopes up – and then they were dashed. I would find myself getting angry at God. "Wait a second, God! All through this time, I didn't have sex with anyone. I was a great role model to my kids. I prayed every day. I led single mom's group. I have been nothing but a fantastic Christian woman of honor. Where is my husband?"

This leads to a kind of spiritual crisis. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be married. It's a good desire. It's holy. It's pure. But then we start asking, "God, why are you withholding this? Don't You love me? I've served You so faithfully. Why do You withhold this one desire?" I don't know what you believe about this, but I think that being angry with God is actually showing God respect, because if you didn't believe that there was a god, it wouldn't matter if you were angry at God or not. The only kind of person who can be angry at God – really angry at God – is a person who really believes

that God exists, that He is powerful, and that He is good.

NATALIE: Yes!

GRETCHEN: So being angry with God shows respect to God. I've heard pastors say that getting angry with God is a sin and that we shouldn't question God. But I'll tell you, some of the best growth times of my life have been the result of being really furious with God.

NATALIE: It shows that you trust Him too. It shows that you believe that you are safe with Him.

GRETCHEN: Yes, absolutely. King David did it in the Psalms. There are lots of angry Psalms. Job did it. To me, it shows that I believe in God, and that God and I have a relationship that is so strong and so personal we can have tremendous times of anger. I remember being so angry and standing out in a field and shaking my fist at the sky. Sometimes these spiritual crises go on for a long time, but it's important. It allows us to throw away our Coke machine view of God, our old, immature views of God, our formulaic views of God – that if I do A, B, and C, then I am going to get D from God.

We end up having a real relationship with the real God of the universe Who really does love us and Who really does care. I can't tell anyone else how long it will take or what you will personally learn, but I will say that it changes you and it changes you in powerful ways. I will admit that I was angry at God for a full year. Yet today, I would say that I came out with a far deeper and more intimate faith.

Let me just throw out one more thing. When you are going through a spiritual crisis, do you remember I said before that it's when you are a second-class Christian that you can really evangelize? The same thing happens when you are in a spiritual crisis. I would be walking along the bluffs of the beach and run into someone. We'd be looking at the waves and get to talking. I'd say, "I'm in the middle of a real funk. I'm experiencing a spiritual crisis. I've been a devout Christian all of my life, and I feel like God has completely abandoned me." Then they would turn to me and say, "Wow! You know, I've felt that way too."

The next thing you know, we are both encouraging each other to hold onto God. I've even had people who were atheists tell me that they actually sort of do believe in God, but they would not have done that had I not admitted first what a deep spiritual crisis I was in and how much I felt like God had abandoned me. It's been an amazing thing. Again, I would say that I came out with a far deeper and more intimate faith. So don't

be afraid to show your anger to God. He's big and He can handle it.

NATALIE: Don't you feel, too, like you have a deep understanding of a person who has had a deep crisis of faith and they did abandon or do call themselves an agnostic or an atheist? But you can kind of tell that there is still so much anxiety in them. Don't you feel a sense of camaraderie with them or a sense of, "I know exactly where you are coming from. I understand, and it's okay. What you are going through is okay." God is so much bigger than our doubts. I think He can handle our doubts, and this is a journey.

So for people who are doubting and are angrily saying, "I'm an atheist because I can't believe that a good God would be this way," that's okay. Their story is not over yet. I've seen bad stuff on Facebook and Twitter. Christians will say such horrible things, and I think, "You know, their story has not been written yet, and here we are criticizing? Who are we to criticize, and what kind of faith do we have in God when we think that God can't handle that kind of doubt and that kind of fear in the face of the reality of brokenness in this world and the pain that people go through?"

GRETCHEN: Amen. We can say, "Wow! I can't believe what happened to you. If that happened to me, I would doubt God too," or "I might doubt organized religion too," or "I would struggle with my faith too." I've seen people when they are shown just a little empathy. Or when you say, "I know exactly what you are talking about. I know what it's like to have a church betray me or feel like God let down His end of the bargain. I totally get that."

I have a good friend who walked away from God right after she got out of high school. Today, forty years later, she has just now finally come back to the Lord because people said, "Yeah, what you experienced in high school was horrible – the double standards, the unfairness, the mean things that Christian leaders said to you. I totally understand why you walked away." Now she feels like she's affirmed, like someone is hearing her, that they empathize, and they know that's not the way people of faith ought to behave, and now she's come back to the Lord. I think just a little empathy – hugs instead of interrogation – is the way to go.

NATALIE: Exactly. Gretchen, this has been so encouraging. I really appreciate your being willing to come back a second time, fill in the gaps, and flush out even more of what you had started with. For those of you who didn't get a chance to listen to her first one, she was here two episodes ago for Episode 33. I encourage you to go over and listen to her first show. She tells a little more of her story as a single. We will for sure have you back when your book comes out. Her book is coming out next year sometime. It's called

“The Life-Saving Divorce.” I think that book will end up being a book that people go through in small groups with other divorcees.

GRETCHEN: Yeah. I’m going to have a whole chapter that is kind of a curriculum. I think your material on verbal, emotional, and mental abuse is fabulous. It is really worth reading.

NATALIE: Thank you. Is this content resonating with you? If it is, I hope that you’ll share it with someone else you know who would benefit from it as well. I also would love it if you would head over to Apple Podcasts and leave a rating and a review. Your feedback helps other people just like you find this content. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time, fly free.