

HOW DO I FIND A GOOD MAN AND A GOOD CHURCH?

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 42 of the Flying Free Podcast! I have something unique this week. This past weekend I got together with five of my online advocate friends for a restful, relaxing weekend. But we didn't spend the whole weekend relaxing. We spent a lot of it doing what we really love to do, which is talking about how we can help survivors of abuse. We decided to record a podcast. All six of us gathered around a little microphone in the middle of the living room floor and recorded this. I'll put pictures in the show notes if you want to see what that looked like.

We answer two listeners' questions in this podcast. One of the questions is about relationships after divorce, and another question is about finding a good church after experiencing spiritual abuse. There are lots of really good gems of wisdom from all of these experienced advocates in this episode. I think you will really enjoy it.

If you listen to this episode and realize that you have a question, or a couple of questions, that you would like to ask, you can do that. If you go to flyingfreenow.com/podcast, click into any of the podcast episodes and you'll see a recording button that will let you record your question, and we may answer it in an upcoming episode. This episode is sponsored by the Flying Free Sisterhood, which offers a safe community along with education and coaching tools to help women of faith heal from emotional and spiritual abuse. You can learn more about that at joinflyingfree.com. Without any further ado, let's meet our guests.

RACHEL: Hi everybody. It's Rachel, the community support director for Flying Free. You guys have heard me here before. It's great to be up here in Michigan with all these ladies.

SARAH: Hi, I'm Sarah McDugal, and I'm a blogger and abuse recovery coach. I also write books on training churches to respond better to abuse.

JULIE ANNE: Hi, I'm Julie Anne Smith. I blog at Spiritual Sounding Board. The blog covers all kinds of abuse in the church and Christian organizations.

REBECCA: My name is Becky, and I am a thriver. I am out of my marriage for five years

now, and I've been remarried for several years to a wonderful man. I've used a lot of Natalie's resources.

KIM: My name is Kim, and I am part of Flying Free also. I am a thriver. I've been separated and divorced from my ex-husband for three years now, and life is good.

NATALIE: We are going to play the first question. We've got two questions today. Here comes the first one.

CALLER 1: I would like to know how you can tell in a dating relationship if you are dating an abusive person.

NATALIE: I think it's important before we get into this to make note of the fact that three of the women sitting around this microphone right now are engaged to be married. They are out of their prior abusive relationships. They are in new relationships and are going to be married. One of them is getting married in one week, so we're super excited. That is our very own Rachel. We're so excited for her. Then two of us have been remarried for two years or longer. One of us is in the middle of the divorce process, so she's not moving on to a new relationship at this point. So those are the perspectives that we are coming from. One of us had a question.

KIM: So, I'm coming from my current frame of reference from my relationship now. I'm wondering, Rachel, what you think? If you must ask this question about what the red flags are about your current dating partner, I'm wondering if that might be a bad sign?

RACHEL: It could, in and of itself, be a bad sign, for sure. I do have to say it is tricky, because for me, my awareness level is set so high that I am looking for anything that could possibly be a red flag. Honestly, I probably overthink it a little bit too much. So finding that balance is key. For me, it was just the fact that my now-fiancé treated me with so much kindness and respect. If you see actions that are not within those boundaries, that might be a red flag.

REBECCA: I'm one of the married gals, and I would say when I started dating my now fantastic husband, I was really worried about love-bombing.

SARAH: Y'all should see the blush in her cheeks.

REBECCA: But I was married to an abuser who had never paid me a compliment before. So here is this new guy, and he starts saying things like, "You're beautiful; you're wonderful; you're so smart." I overthought it and was super concerned, thinking he was

love-bombing. But my gut response was that he was a safe man. I had to be careful not to overthink, not think that every man was an abuser, and to trust my gut. The number one thing I did was to watch his relationships with everyone else. People really respected and admired him not because he was some fake, charming guy, but because he was true and honest. Kindness was his number one character quality that I respected.

SARAH: I am one of the engaged girls. I think one of the important things is to remember that confusion and fog are signs of an emotionally abusive relationship. Period. If there isn't clarity, if you don't know exactly where you stand, if there are circular conversations and you are living with word-salad kind of things or are off-again-on-again and you're not really sure — those are red flags — big time red flags.

I would say one of the hallmarks of a great dating/engaged/married relationship is peace and harmony and clarity. That is because the amazing person in my life now has never once left me wondering where he stands or how he feels. I've had people in my history who were vacillating all over the place, were off and on, and I never knew when the other shoe was going to drop.

RACHEL: Here's what's tricky: that feels like passion, sometimes. People who are used to unhealthy relationships like I was, always with the thrill of the chase and thinking, "If I can just win him over or just wear the right outfit or say the right words, then he's going to love me," it feels like such a romantic thing, and it's not. So sometimes the kind, respectful man like my fiancé, it can feel like, "Do I really love him, because I'm not falling all over the place trying to make him love me?" It's a total rewiring and a total shift. The peace and comfort of knowing where you stand is so critical to have when you are in a good relationship. That is going to be a big characteristic.

KIM: I would also say if you have a Christian faith, is he living out each one of the fruits of the Spirit on almost a daily basis? Is he showing that fruit in tangible ways? If you don't see it, that, to me, would be a big red flag.

SARAH: Well, "nice" is not a character trait. Kindness is a character trait. "Nice" gets you nowhere except everywhere, but then there's...

RACHEL: What's the difference, do you think?

SARAH: I think that "nice" is a tool that you use to get people to do what you want. When you are worried about "nice" versus "kind," you must watch whether or not it comes with strings attached, whether or not there is an attitude of, "But I did that for

them, so why are they treating me this way?" That is nice; it is not kind.

REBECCA: "Kind" is taking into consideration, looking directly at you, the person, and being "nice" about your specific qualities. Somebody being nice is not going to dive into who you are as a person, but kind is going to really know you well. Does that make sense?

RACHEL: Yeah, it's personal.

NATALIE: Okay, I want to segway off of that, because this is the number one thing that you want to look for in a healthy relationship. That is that you can be totally and completely 100% yourself — not just the good parts of yourself, but you can also show up with the bad parts of yourself — and the other person embraces you as a whole package. They are actually seeing you, so that means that you get to show up. So if you are feeling like every time you show up with a different opinion from him or you want to do something different than him and you can tell that he is chafed by that, that's a problem. That's a huge red flag.

Let me ask those of you who are engaged and you who are remarried, did you all experience that? Have you disagreed with your fiancés or your husband, and what happens when you do?

REBECCA: So, the married girl goes first here. Yes, we have greatly disagreed. But what I have found is the difference between an abuser and a healthy man is first, the issues at hand were always things outside of our marriage and not inside our relationship. Then, when we were confronted... And I'm talking like, it could be exhaustion. There was a point where we were moving, and we had a terrible time with the closing of the house being moved. We didn't know if we were going to be homeless for a few days because the dates were so far off. It was frustrating and overwhelming. But when we were both at the point of frustration, we never lashed out at each other. We looked at each other and said, "I know it's hard. I get where you are at. And it is totally okay."

SARAH: Teamwork.

REBECCA: Yes. But with an abuser, an opportunity for stress or an opportunity for frustration is only a tool to further the abuse. That's a big difference.

SARAH: An excuse to lash out, yeah.

REBECCA: Or for me in my first marriage, in my frustration... I sometimes look back and

can't believe the frustration I lived with now that I am in a healthy relationship. I would lose my temper and then that would be cause for him to say, "See. You are the problem." So it double-bound me to an even worse situation.

SARAH: Right. I think a huge part of it is just being able to say, "This is how I feel about something," and there is no price to pay. There is no hell to pay for you being an autonomous person. I love how you have really stressed that this weekend, Becky. To say, "This is how I feel," and for them to say, "Okay. That's great." It's welcomed and it's safe.

KIM: It's a safe space. You have that safe space.

SARAH: If you feel afraid... I know, Natalie, you were saying that if you share a less desirable part or a different opinion and they get upset, that's obviously a huge red flag. But I think if you feel afraid to share that, if you instinctively keep back parts of yourself that are different from him, even if it's not a bad part but just a different part, that tells you it's not a safe relationship, because you're instinctively scared to actually say who you are and what you think.

REBECCA: But you could be scared at first and it be a healthy relationship only because...

SARAH: ...you've been conditioned. For twenty years I was conditioned to be afraid. I remember the first time he apologized to me, I think I fell out because, "Oh my gosh! He admitted he was wrong. What?"

REBECCA: I know. Or the fact that I could be frustrated and it was okay. He just gave me a hug. I remember we had to deal with a custodial issue with my youngest son. I thought I was going to lose it because it was so unfair. He just hugged me. I remember that's all it took.

RACHEL: Yes. That's one of the characteristics of my relationship now. I realize how incredible it is. I'm still healing in a lot of ways, both from childhood trauma and from my previous marriage, and he is just there with me. He doesn't try to fix it. He doesn't try to say some pat words. He's just given me a hug, and a lot of times shedding a few tears with him is all it takes, and I'm okay. What felt overwhelming to me a few minutes ago becomes, "Okay, this will be all right."

Another thing I want to mention is that I remember one of the first articles I read from Natalie was a list of traits to look at. It was a letter to single women, essentially. It's still

on the blog, I'm sure, if you want. It's like "Twelve Traits" — I think. I can't remember. But the number one is "Does he take responsibility for himself?" That is the key difference between an abuser and someone who is healthy. Do they take responsibility for themselves in everything? I might be confusing two articles.

NATALIE: It has something to do with red flags.

KIM: Signs of a unhealthy relationship or something like that.

NATALIE: I don't know. Does anyone read my blog out there?

SARAH: You can put it in the show links so they can find it.

REBECCA: Do you know why it's so freeing? When he accepts responsibility, we are no longer shouldering two responsibilities.

ALL: Yes. Exactly.

REBECCA: You are just responsible for yourself, and it is just...

SARAH: It's so easy. It's amazing!

RACHEL: That's all you must do. It feels so free.

SARAH: I want to throw out another category of red flags, especially for younger women like teen girls or early twenties, if it's your first relationship. I think sometimes if you've already been married and been through it, we may have our own list of red flags. But when you are young, somebody who pushes the boundaries can seem super exciting, right? And risk-taking behaviors can seem like adventure, excitement, spontaneity, and that it will never be boring. But really, a lot of the categories of risk-taking behaviors are highly self-centered and low in empathy. So if someone doesn't care that they are driving recklessly and taking the lives of their passengers in their hands and breaking the speeding laws, that is someone who doesn't care about rules and someone who thinks that having fun is more important than being safe. That's a huge red flag. Someone who gets road rage when someone else cuts them off or is driving slow means that things that they can't control are going to piss them off. Someone who treats waiters or cashiers with less than human respect because they made a mistake or their food didn't come right is someone who, later, is going to cut you down because you're not going to be a person to them later, either.

So that lack of kindness and those big risk-taking, thrill-seeking behaviors are often signs of reduced empathy and a total disregard. That will be the person who, later, when they have an addiction or a porn habit or whatever, will excuse major moral failures in themselves but will take you to task for not loading the dishwasher right. They will have a huge double standard. That's really a good way to put it. If they have a double standard — like there is always a good reason for stupid things, wrong things, or hugely stupid stuff they did, but for everyone else they are super judgmental and critical for small mistakes — that is going to make your life a living hell later. And your kids.

REBECCA: One of the ways you can kind of put a test to them, and I did this with my now-husband... I have five kids, so I would purposely say, "No," when he invited me to do something to test. I'd say, "I want to spend time with my kids." An abuser is not going to want to be told "no." They want to isolate you. They want your time, even if it is your kids. So first I did it with kids. Then I did it with girlfriends. I just wanted to push the limit and see what he was going to do. In dating, it is going to come out. But it didn't. He's texted me probably ten times saying, "I really hope you're enjoying those women in Michigan."

NATALIE: Awe, that's so sweet. My husband right now in Minnesota is cleaning our house today. And you've got to listen to what Kim, who is hosting us, listen to what her fiancé has been doing.

KIM: Well, I wasn't going to say that.

SARAH: Oh, but you should.

KIM: He's been coming and doing the dishes for us this weekend. He's a keeper. He's amazing. But one thing I wanted to say, and this is something about him that I had to keep reminding myself of, is to check to see if this person that you are dating has had long-lasting relationships around him — friendships. That's one thing that my guy... He's had friends for twenty-five, thirty years. I think that is also a testament to how he treats those around him.

NATALIE: That's good. We're going to move on to the next question.

SARAH: Can we do this? We promised this reader that we would do that, and the next question doesn't have it. We did a live video on my page earlier, and we got this question that we didn't have time to answer. So we promised them we would answer it here. She asks, "Can y'all crack this open?" Then she puts in this meme that says, "If you

are dating someone who has been subjected to abuse or mistreatment and you notice them idealizing you for treating them with basic respect, don't take the ego boost. Tell them they are always entitled to basic kindness and respect in every relationship." Underneath she says, "I've heard it called Cinderella syndrome, where you do the smallest shred of kindness and you are suddenly amazing because you did something extremely basic, because if you've been abused, you don't expect that you deserve any of that." What do you guys think of that?

KIM: I have the guy that has been doing the dishes. But I say this to him so much. It's so funny that you say this, because I tell him, "You're just so wonderful." He is so humble, and he'll say, "I'm really not. You just had the bar set so low in your previous relationship." There is still that humility. Watch for humility in any future relationship.

SARAH: Also, something that is a comment under that, victims who have been deprived of normal human compassion and kindness can feel extremely indebted to those who show it. So if someone is treating you with basic human respect, that doesn't necessarily need to create a sense of obligation and indebtedness. I know I struggle with this. My guy is a lot like yours. He will do things and I will say, "Oh my goodness." Instinctively I will be thinking, "What do I need to do back? How do I need to balance the debt ratio here?" But I don't, and that blows my mind still, even years out of it.

KIM: Right, you just have to rest in him giving you that. But that's hard.

REBECCA: I think it's something you learn, too. We're in year three or something like that. (You know you get old and you don't count anymore.) I know that it was a big transition to be married again because something clicked in my brain, and I thought, suddenly, that I had to be sure that he was happy all of the time. You have to be careful, all of you gals, when you get married that the brain doesn't revert back to thinking, "Oh, now I'm in marriage" and all of that crap that we were taught or lived under that says "It's all about him" and "He's the one that deserves a great life at every expense that I can give him." It didn't take me long, because my husband would say, "Would you stop doing that? Go shopping for yourself and buy yourself something," or "You need to take a break. You've not taken a break. You're not sleeping enough hours. You need to sleep more." It was neat to go from... It was just another step of learning healthiness.

NATALIE: That's beautiful. We're going to listen to the next question now.

CALLER 2: Hi. I have been through divorce a year and a half ago and was in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship before that. I think my biggest struggle

right now is trying to figure out how to get back into a church. I would like to be involved with a church family again, but due to the emotional trauma that came as a result of trying to get help from addictions in the family and then having it destroy my marriage, I don't trust the church anymore. I was shunned by them, and I know that you, Natalie, have explained some similar things that have happened to you. Maybe I've missed it somewhere on your website, but I gag when I go to church. I don't want to listen to the messages. I feel like people are fake and they don't really want to help. They just want you to do all the right things.

JULIE ANNE: This is Julie Anne. Again, I'm a blogger at Spiritual Sounding Board, so spiritual abuse is my area of expertise, I guess. You are in a difficult place. From the sound of your voice, I sense that you haven't fully gotten over the trauma that you experienced. I believe you, and it sounds painful.

The first thing I would encourage you to do is to reach out to people who are safe, who understand spiritual abuse. Read about it. There are a couple of books online that are available for free. You can contact me. But really work on your healing, because spiritual abuse just cuts to the core. I just started back to church recently, and I'll tell you what I did. I Googled "churches near me" and I literally looked up every church and poured over their website. I was looking for things like how they view women. I am now egalitarian, so I didn't want to go to a church that has a power-over situation of husbands over wives. I looked at their beliefs on marriage and remarriage. I looked at how they handled addictions or if there was anything mentioned like that. I saw if they were involved in the community or not. You can get a good picture of a church just by going to their website. You can weed out a ton. So that's the first thing that I would recommend.

Then what I also did was to go to a meeting that they held to ask questions about the church. I brought my list of questions and just ran through my list. You want to have most of your concerns answered. "How are you going to deal with abuse? How are you guys going to deal with addiction? What are your beliefs on remarriage? What are your beliefs on domestic violence? Where is a woman's place in a church?" Those types of questions are what I was asking. So do that. You don't have to be settled. You can try out a church for a little bit. Tell the pastor, "I'm just going to hang for a few weeks. I'm just testing the waters."

See what happens if you say, "I was really harmed in the church." How do they respond to that? Are they going to be sympathetic, or are they going to say, "What did you do to cause it?" You're going to get a feel by their response. Are they empathetic? Are they encouraging? Do they say, "Boy, that is really tough, and I want to do whatever I can do

to help you"? That's the kind of stuff that you need to look for. It is possible to find a safe church. It is hard when you've gone through it, but give yourself some time.

Another thing I would say, also, is to not guilt yourself if you haven't gone to a church right away, even for a year. I think God can handle it. I know that He grieves when His people are harmed, especially women and children. So you take your time and do what you need to do to get to that healthy place and start getting your feet wet again.

NATALIE: I was going to say, there are going to be some of you listening who maybe live in more rural areas or in small towns, and you maybe only have a limited number of choices of churches. Maybe you've already vetted all of them and you realize that none of them are truly safe. In that case, you may do what some of us have done, which is that we just don't go to church anymore. That doesn't mean that we are not in fellowship with believers. We are in fellowship online. We are listening to good preaching. There are some great preachers out there. You don't have to go to their church to access them. You can listen to them online. There is [sermons.org](https://www.sermons.org). Some of them, like Woodland Hills Church, Greg Boyd, have a podcast. I think it's just called Woodland Hills Church. There are others that you can find. Go to Julie Anne's Spiritual Sounding Board. Do you have a resource list of people to listen to?

JULIE ANNE: I don't have a list, but I do know Bent Tree Bible Fellowship is very compassionate towards women and abuse.

NATALIE: Is it an online resource?

JULIE ANNE: They do have online church every week.

NATALIE: Oh. Bent Tree Bible Fellowship?

JULIE ANNE: Bent Tree Bible Fellowship, yeah. They are wonderful.

UNKNOWN: Who's the pastor there?

JULIE ANNE: I can't remember, but I know Mitch Little is one of the elders and he preaches. He preached on domestic violence and connected with me at one time about that. So I know he's really good. When someone is willing to talk about abuse from the pulpit, you know you've got a good church, probably.

NATALIE: [Not] going to church is something that a lot of us who have come out of conservative environments have been raised to believe... "You may not even be a

Christian, but for certain sure you're a bad Christian or whatever [if you don't go]."

RACHEL: Backslidden.

NATALIE: Yeah, a backslidden Christian. That is simply not true. That's not what the Bible teaches. Our relationship with Jesus Christ is not determined by how much we read the Bible, how much we pray, how much time we put into church ministry, or how many times we show up at church. That is legalistic living. Our relationship with God is between us and Jesus Christ. You can have "church" in your living room or at a coffee shop with a Christian friend. You can worship God all day long with your earphones or your earbuds. You can read your Bible on your own. You can do a Bible study on your own.

I think we need to start changing our paradigm of what the global church of Jesus Christ actually is. There's a lot of people in this world on planet Earth who don't go to a building on Sunday mornings. That's a very American idea of how to do church. We just have to open our minds up to a more organic idea of what church is. Believe me, I'm not dissing church or anything. I'm sort of blabbing now. Let's go around and say how you have handled this whole thing. Do you go to church? Do you not go to church?

REBECCA: I'm Becky, the married one. Still in love.

KIM: We're talking about church now, Becky.

REBECCA: I will tell you, as I was listening to these gals talk about church, I was instantly reminded that I think the doctrine of going to church on Sunday was so steeped in me that the Lord had to use years before I divorced to actually wean me off of that, because I was put in a position to travel about seven months out of the year, and I couldn't go to church on Sunday. I just felt like there was no way I could be a Christian, yet I had to put food on the table for my kids. I remember very vividly the Lord saying at a low point, when I was thinking the problems in my life, which were really my abuser's problems, were because I wasn't going to church and ticking off all the checkboxes of Christianity... The Lord said, "Becky, sojourn as Abraham did." For seven years, that's what I did.

The one thing people can never take from you, as Corrie ten Boom said, is the power of prayer. They cannot take away prayer. So you can commune with God all day long through conversations. "Lord, I thought this, what do you think? Is this the right way of thinking? What verse do You want me to study today?"

So today, I do not go to church currently. I'm not going to say if that's a forever condition, but I do live in a rural community. When I attend church, I am triggered often by their second-class, submissive, doormat theology that runs rampant in the south. So I have not been able to find a place that I feel comfortable with. So what I do is I have great friends who are Christians, and I have an online community. I read a lot of theology books. What I love about being away from the church is that it has allowed me to think questions that, if I was in church, I could not think. It has given me a bigger view of God, a bigger view of His love for women, and an understanding that He created me completely equal. I know we say that, but I don't know that we really know what that means. So that's me.

NATALIE: Thank you.

SARAH: I speak at a lot of churches, so I'm in church often. I take my children to church as well, because I want them to have an experience that is untainted with some of the things that I have been through, and I think that's important to them. It's where a lot of their friends are and so on.

But what I can say is that the one year that I experienced the most explosive spiritual healing and growth was a year when I decided... I had faced a big personal loss, and I realized that if I didn't get out ahead of it, I was going to spiral down. I was going to get really discouraged, and then I was going to have to pull back up out of that place. This was after I had been a single parent for a while, so this was not my divorce, but something later. I remember thinking, "How can I get out ahead of this so that I am closely connected with God and that I stay strong?"

What I did was to ask two or three of my girlfriends, I said, "I have this radical idea. I want to do forty days of prayer in community." We lived in all four time zones of the U.S., so nobody was local, and I didn't have this knit community of close girlfriends in my town that I could rely on. I know there are a lot of women like that. Your friends are someplace else. I messaged a couple of friends and said, "I'd like to do forty days of prayer and read the Bible and no other books." I think other people's books are great. I'm not being some kind of purist where you can't read anything written by another person in this century. But for this season in time, I wanted to go back to just what God says and not have it filtered through other people's opinion. I wanted to spend time every single day and not miss a day for forty days of reconnecting with God and praying out loud. I said, "I feel like my prayer life really needs a boost. Are you guys game? This is radical! If we commit to this, we're going to try to find a time every single day for forty days."

We started out and it was like, ten minutes long. We were going to pray. “What do you want to pray about?” Then, in ten or fifteen minutes, we were done. By the time we were done forty days later, we were spending two and a half hours or more a day together for that period of time. It felt like it was too little. Nobody was telling us we had to do this, but we were enjoying so much the stuff that we were learning. All we were doing was asking God, “Jesus, what do You want me to learn today? How do You want to guide our conversation?” Then we prayed about stuff. We were seeing stuff start to happen.

As we got done, we thought, “We don’t want this to stop. Do you want to sign on for another forty days?” So we did. In the third forty days we had another girlfriend who said, “I keep hearing what you are saying. Can I get in on this?” It mushroomed from there, and we eventually couldn’t sustain that much. That was a lot and for a short period of time. But my biggest personal growth and spiritual healing after not wanting to be in church was when I came completely away from church and connected with other girls and said, “I want to do this radical thing that is just all about Jesus — no preconceived ideas — and see what God has to speak to us as women directly with nobody else in between.” That was really life transforming.

NATALIE: Wow. I love that.

SARAH: That was worship.

NATALIE: I was thinking of putting an advertisement for my book right after you say, “We didn’t read any books. We only read the Bible.” Then I thought maybe I’d put my ad for my book right there.

SARAH: You should do that! But if you do that, can you put an ad for mine right after that, too? But you know, just coming away from everything that is contrived, what we are told worship is supposed to look like, and saying, “You know what, me on the phone with a girlfriend praying for our kids together, that can be worship, too.”

NATALIE: Exactly!

RACHEL: That’s so true.

SARAH: That’s worship, and it counts.

NATALIE: What are you doing, Rachel?

RACHEL: My experience with God is that I've been a Christian since I was really little, but I was always so wrapped in shame because I had a marriage that sucked and my family didn't look like anything that anything else in my church looked like as far as when I was growing up. Then in my marriage, I was never able to get a picture of the ideal type of Christian marriage that I thought I was going to get. So I was so ashamed of that.

But when I started this process of waking up and everything, my relationship with God got lit on fire. It was amazing. I had always struggled to read my Bible every day, but now I couldn't get enough of His Word. I couldn't get enough of finding out Who He was. It was a radical idea to go to the Bible and see for myself Who He was.

My church, the church we were going to as a family before I got divorced — it could have been worse when I went to them with what I was doing. My pastor wasn't very educated in it, but was supportive in wanting to see what we could do. Then my ex-husband got to him. So when I made the decision to divorce, I went up to him one day after service and said, "I'm going to get divorced." He said, "There's two sides to every story." I thought, "Okay." Honestly, I haven't talked to him since. I still go. I still volunteer in the youth group. My son goes to youth group there, so it's been important. I'm at a place where I don't really know what the future holds for me at the church, but I do feel like I'm supposed to be helping with the youth group.

It's hard for me to sit in the service, because it's very classical, Christian, "die to yourself" type messages that, honestly, sort of enable abuse. They are never nuanced enough in order to help you see how things really should be structured. I also listen to sermons online all the time and have fellowship. Just making it what I can do with worship and fellowship has been really good and freeing for me. I don't know what the future holds, but this is where I am right now.

JULIE ANNE: Can I say something?

NATALIE: Absolutely!

JULIE ANNE: I left a church where the church folded — let's just say that. I already explained how I went through the websites. But I am just so thrilled, because I've been able to go to coffee two or three times with my pastors and shared my heart. I asked them, "What are your goals and visions for the church? How can you see me used in ministry, because I would like to be a part of that?" I just like what I hear. They are so interested in people who are oppressed. They are interested in people who have been harmed by the church. I mean, they are speaking my language. How in the world did I find this?

But to me, that is church when you are seeking people who are harmed in the community and in the church. Also, when our heart, our core, is aligned together. I'm excited about that. I know there is no perfect church. But to me, this church has everything on the table that I am looking for, and they are open, honest, and humble, too. I've been excited about some of the messages. I've seen how they are applicable to me in my life, and this is so refreshing.

So there is positive stuff if you look hard. Maybe there isn't in your area, but maybe there is online. There is that possibility. One thing you could do... Natalie was saying you could have it at home. I know of a group of about twenty people, husbands, wives, and singles, who get together once a month, but then every other week they do a community outreach. They are helping the domestic violence shelter and are being the hands and feet of Jesus in the community. That's a cool option as well, and to me, that is church. Anyway, I just want to leave you with some encouragement. You can find hope and peace at church. We should always be on guard, but we want to keep that in balance as much as possible.

NATALIE: You mentioned two books that you said were free online. Do you know the names of those, or could we put those links in the show notes, maybe?

JULIE ANNE: I think one is "The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse."

RACHEL: Is that free, though?

JULIE ANNE: There's two of them that are free. I have them on my website in the resources.

NATALIE: Well, I will link to those, then, in the show notes.

JULIE ANNE: Okay.

NATALIE: Well, that's it. Thank you so much for joining us today. Until next week, fly free.