

CAN A CHRISTIAN GET A DIVORCE?

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 63 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have with me a repeat guest, Gretchen Baskerville. If you have listened to this podcast for a while, she has been with us three times prior to this. I know you're going to want to find her after this episode. You can find her on episodes 33, 35, and 56. Gretchen is the author of "The Life-Saving Divorce." It's a newly released book. I've talked about it on my blog and we've talked about it on past episodes. But that was prior to it being released. Now it is released. I want to talk more with Gretchen about why she wrote the book and address some of the issues women are most concerned about when they are thinking about getting a divorce. So, Gretchen, welcome to the podcast again.

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

NATALIE: Gretchen, I'm curious, and I think the listeners might be as well: why in the world did you want to write a book about divorce?

GRETCHEN: Yeah, what's a nice Christian girl like me doing becoming a divorce advocate?

NATALIE: Exactly! You are like a marriage breaker-upper.

GRETCHEN: Exactly. Just to assure everyone, my Christian bona fides are amazing. I was brought up in a devout Christian home. My parents have been happily married for sixty years and are going strong to this day. I was raised devoutly evangelical. I read all of Elizabeth Elliot's "Passion to Purity" books. I'm a boomer, so I got married before "I Kissed Dating Goodbye" ever came out. But we had our own version of purity culture long before that book came out because we had "Passion to Purity," which taught us to be very passive, that we couldn't take any kind of initiative, and that we had to do a lot of mind reading with the person we were dating. Also books like "Fascinating Girlhood," so the same kinds of principles. Our rules were a little bit different as boomers. We could kiss and make out, but our hands could not go wherever a bathing suit covered. Those were our rules.

The other rules were if you do everything right you were going to have this deep, close

connection with your spouse, and you will have mind-blowing sex. The formulas were there. We still had the formulas that promised us these amazing marriages if we did every single step. That included that the guy would ask permission from the girl's father to date her, and then eventually to prove that he was financially stable, and then ask for her hand in marriage. Variations of the purity culture rules existed way back in baby-boomer and prior generations as well.

So when you ask, "Why did you write this book?" twenty-five years ago I went through a life-saving divorce. I was in a situation where I just could not stay. I was terrified for my children and I was worried about all these messages like, "You're a quitter." I knew I wasn't a quitter because I knew what was going on behind closed doors. I knew what all the secrets were. But I was worried that other people would look down on me and condemn me. I did choose to get a life-saving divorce. I was very worried for my kids. But fast-forward to the good news: my children are now adults. They completed their educations. They are great human beings. They are wonderful employees and wonderful friends. Everybody likes them. They are a great asset to our society.

NATALIE: So you didn't end up in a trailer park eating cat food, then?

GRETCHEN: No. Even though at the time... I didn't see my divorce coming. There was a moment in time where I caught my husband doing something horrible, and my mind went completely numb. I hadn't stored up money for this. I hadn't prepared for this in any way. I knew he had serious, serious problems in his life. We had fasted and prayed and gone to church marriage retreats and seen a zillion counselors. I had even resigned myself to the fact that happiness in marriage is really overrated, so I'll just keep plugging through. But I didn't have any money stored away. I had a little home-based business and I was making \$500 a month. That wouldn't even cover my housing. I looked at the future and was just terrified. My father said to me, "Trust God. Obey. Just pay one bill at a time. Don't project all your fears out into the future because when we do that, we aren't projecting God's grace and power out into the future."

God's grace and power and His love... Remember, we all know those verses. "My strength is made perfect in your weakness." This is the time to remember those great verses. That's what happened. I don't even know how I made it through the first year. That was a miracle to me, but through borrowing from my parents and getting rid of my acrylic nails and really cutting down on everything, we made it through. I had been in the workforce before. I had been a pretty good salesperson. I knew that I could make good money in sales. So I weighed whether I should stay with my little home-based business or should I go back into the salesforce? In my case, I felt the Lord was calling me to stay and work in my own home-based business, which ended up taking off, doing

well, and eventually giving me a living wage.

Two years after my divorce, the women's ministries at my church knew that I was a devout Christian. I had a Bible degree from Wheaton College. They said, "We've got a lot of single moms and divorcees in this church. Would you start a support group for them?" So I and another woman started a support group. Wow was it fabulous! The level of sharing, intimacy, and camaraderie was better than any Bible study I had ever been in. We really cared about one another, called each other, and really supported each other. Over time, as I listened to their stories, I heard amazing stories of total horror: domestic violence, women having knives thrown at them, women being dragged by their heels and thrown against walls. I thought, "I don't think our churches really understand what is going on here."

I started exploring scripture and realizing that God doesn't want us treated this way. We innocent spouses were being treated like second-class citizens in our churches. We were being removed from leadership positions and things like that, even on the worship team, even though we were the faithful spouses. We were the ones who kept trying over and over again. We were the ones who kept walking in the door when we knew that our spouse was going to do something horrible or abuse us again.

After a while, women would come to my group and say, "You are saying things we have never heard from anyone else. You really need to write a book." I thought, "Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'll write a book someday." I would write chapters of the book, so a lot of the research in this book I started ten to twenty years ago. I wanted to know how I ever got into a horrible marriage like this, and what could I say to my children to keep them from getting into horrible marriages? What could I do to educate other evangelical churches and our youth pastors so that they don't create an environment where young people don't get into horrible marriages? I started researching that early. Chapter two of my book is research that goes back literally ten or fifteen years as I looked back on "What are we doing wrong that so many good Christian women are getting into these horrible relationships?"

I was single for twenty years. I was a single mother for twenty years after my divorce. People can listen to my story in Episode 33. God blessed me abundantly! I'm not going to lie, those first three years were tough. I did have a lot of court abuse in my story. I was dragged into court every year for ten years over custody, yet God was with us. We survived and we ended up thriving. I love to tell the story of God's faithfulness through all of this. After twenty years of being single, I finally remarried. I have a wonderful husband who loves the snot out of me.

NATALIE: That is awesome!

GRETCHEN: He loves feisty women! He loves outspoken women. He's not at all intimidated by the fact that I did well in my career. He just thinks it's awesome: "You go girl!" He's the one who said, "You have so much to say on this topic, you've got to write a book." That is sort of a long explanation for why I wrote it. But I finally sat down and started writing, and I got a good kick in the pants from you and a few other people online. I was part of an executive roundtable, a completely secular group, here in Los Angeles. The men and women in that group said, "You've got a lot to say, you've got to write a book." So that's how it started.

NATALIE: That is incredible! What I think is interesting is that it is in the context of being married to a healthy man that you were able to put this thing out in the world that has the potential to change lives. I think when the church tries to keep people in dysfunctional marriages, they don't even realize they are playing into Satan's game and neutralizing people from doing the work of Jesus Christ in the world. It is phenomenal.

GRETCHEN: Absolutely.

NATALIE: I didn't write my book either until I was remarried and had a husband who loves everything about me, loves that I'm a leader, and loves and encourages me to be everything that I can be. I think that is awesome. One of the things I want to talk about today is how your book addresses three different issues. The women that I work with, they come to me while trying to figure out, "My marriage is so confusing and painful. Is it really as bad as all that? Is there any way that I can stay, or should I stay? Should I leave? What should I do?" They are presenting to me with all the signs and symptoms of having been abused over a long period of time. They are concerned about three things. They don't know for sure if divorce is going to be life-saving. They know their life right now is not life-giving, but in their minds they think if they get divorced it will destroy their relationship with God, it will destroy their kids, and it will destroy them financially. So it doesn't sound like a life-saving divorce to them. How would you address those three concerns that a woman would have?

GRETCHEN: In a thirty-minute podcast, I probably can't. But let me give you a few places to start. There is an entire chapter, chapter six of "The Life-Saving Divorce," that is all on God's protection of women and all the Bible verses about allowing divorce for abuse, infidelity, neglect, and failure to provide. But let me start with the big taboo that our churches always point to. They always point to Malachi 2:15-16 where they claim, and I've heard this all my life, that what that Bible verse says is, "I hate divorce" or "God hates divorce." But that is a bad translation. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's a

bad interpretation. I am saying they have got the Hebrew wrong. It's a bad translation. You can go online right now. Stop the podcast for just a moment and go online to a Hebrew Interlinear Bible. Remember that it reads left to right. They have them online. You will see that it doesn't say, "I hate divorce," and it doesn't say, "God hates divorce." Several Bible translations do have it right. The New International Version has it right, and even the English Standard Version, the ESV, has it right.

NATALIE: Which has so many other things wrong, but they do have that one right.

GRETCHEN: They've got that one right, thank goodness. Let me read it to you. Let's take that one, the ESV. It says, "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless." God is not against all divorce. God is against treacherous divorce, the divorce where an abusive man who just takes advantage and exploits his wife (of course, there are men in this situation too, so I don't mean to make it that men are all the bad guys and women are all the good guys) and abandons the innocent, faithful spouse. Those are the divorces God hates.

But God is a divorcee Himself. If you look at Jeremiah 3:8, He divorced Israel because marriage is not an unconditional contract. The Bible talks about both conditional and unconditional contracts. God made some unconditional contracts with Israel, but He made two conditional contracts with them. Marriage is a good example of a conditional contract. God told them, "You've committed spiritual adultery. I'm divorcing you." So even God is a divorcee. I want to make it really clear. If you want more, I've got a whole chapter on this. I think it also bears mentioning that just in the last couple of months, a man who signed and authored the Danvers Statement, the Complementarian Statement, came out in favor of divorce for abuse himself. So the tide is turning on this. If you are staying in that marriage because you believe that God doesn't allow for divorce, read my chapter on this. God does allow divorce for abuse.

NATALIE: Yes, it's a great chapter. I will also point out that she had Dr. David Instone-Brewer... Prior to this I would always recommend his book, and I still recommend it. It's called "Divorce and Remarriage in the Church." He is a scholar out of Britain, right?

GRETCHEN: Yeah. Cambridge.

NATALIE: An incredibly intelligent man who has done his homework, plus he came in and edited that chapter.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, he edited that chapter for me. He went over it twice. If there are any

errors, they are mine and not his. But he went over the chapter with a fine-tooth comb. Even though I have a Bible degree I didn't feel like I was qualified to write on this, so I was thrilled to have him come in and work on this. He gave the book a great endorsement afterwards.

NATALIE: Yes. It is such a good book. We were talking earlier about how she couldn't find a traditional publisher to publish it because the content is so non-traditional as far as what Christian publishers are looking for. It's too bad, because I think this is where we are headed. This is truth, and I think the Church with a big "C" of Jesus Christ is starting to recognize the grave errors they have made in this area that has exploited women and children in the name of God. We are starting to turn that. Just like in all of history, there have been points where God has revealed more of who He is and more of His heart, and then the church shifts and the gospel goes out in even greater power because of that. I really think this is one area, a stronghold of Satan, where the shift is starting to take place. I am super excited about it.

You women who are listening, or pastors or counselors, you are on the cutting edge of this whole thing. You are the pioneers. Those of you who are divorced and have gone through so much pain and have had no support, you are the pioneers. The pioneers went out there and did all the messy work before the rest of the people followed. That's what we've been doing here. I think you can be proud of yourselves and feel like you are being used by God in really powerful ways in history. I went on a little rant there.

GRETCHEN: Absolutely. The church has to adjust to society. I don't know if you saw that article in "Christianity Today," February 4, 2020. It came out and the graph at the very bottom of the article showed how badly evangelicals are doing with divorcees. We have demonized divorcees so badly that they don't want to come to evangelical churches. Now they do show up in droves, but a huge number, twenty percent, do not just because of the negative messaging they get from the pulpit, from Christian authors, and Christian radio broadcasts. We are shooting ourselves in the foot. If the evangelical church wants to grow, the last thing they should be doing right now is demonizing divorcees and saying that divorce is evidence of moral decay in society when tolerating or ignoring abused wives is evidence of moral decay in our churches.

NATALIE: Amen! That is a great quote. Can you talk a little about the financial aspect and the kids aspect, too?

GRETCHEN: Yeah. I was hoping I could get my hands on a study I just ran across recently. What they are discovering is that women after divorce aren't doing as badly as they used to, and it is because of what they call "human capital," which means a lot of

us had some level of job experience before we married or even early in our marriages. Now we have skills, knowledge, and experience that women fifty and one hundred years ago didn't have. So we are better able to get back on our feet. Again, I want to be clear. It took me probably three years to feel like there would be a light at the end of the tunnel for me financially. Within seven years, I was contributing to my retirement fund and doing great.

NATALIE: Can I jump in here really quick? I just want to say that a lot of women were being financially abused. Or in the same way that their husband's character was showing up negatively in the relationship, it was showing up negatively with relation to money. They weren't necessarily in a good place. I know a lot of women who financially were in a very bad place. They didn't have any financial autonomy whatsoever in their relationship. These are smart women. They get out of that relationship to where they do have financial autonomy, and they really make a go of it, like you did.

GRETCHEN: Absolutely. If you've got any kind of drive or are a go-getter, you can do this. Frankly, the workplace is looking for anybody who is honest and hard working. If you are honest, hardworking, and you bring your integrity to the workplace, you are valuable. I think women have a lot more going for them than they think, but they have been talked down to so much by their abuser that they have lost their confidence and self-respect and don't think they can make it. But in many cases, you can.

NATALIE: Yep. I love that. So what about kids? This is the heart of every woman out there. This is their most tender spot. They are worried about their kids.

GRETCHEN: Absolutely! There is nothing a good parent worries about more than their children. The good news is that a lot has changed in divorce and the outcomes of children in the last twenty-five years. Let me give you a few stats, but my chapter seven is all about kids and divorce. There's a lot of good news. When I divorced twenty-five years ago, we didn't even have access to these studies. But now they are saying that 8 of 10 kids whose parents divorce have no serious social, emotional, or psychological problems long term. Of course they are going to feel the stress in the middle of this big divorce battle. In the middle of the divorce process, of course they are going to struggle. You may have to move, make new friends, or go to a different school. Of course that will be tough on them.

But what researchers have also discovered is that if you are in a high-conflict or very high-conflict home where there is abuse, put-downs, or even covert, invisible abuse going on that is causing tension and walking on eggshells and agitation, the kids sense that. I know my three-year-old sensed that twenty-five years ago when I divorced. Even

though he never saw us fighting, we never did anything on the surface. We are in denial if we think that kids aren't catching on to that.

What researchers discovered was that if you are in one of these high-conflict or high-distress or very high-distress marriages, it was ten times better for you and the children if you got out of a very high-conflict home than if you had stayed. We don't have a choice. You will see it on all sorts of conservative think tanks and websites that "Being raised in a two-parent home is better for kids." Of course it's better for kids, but we don't have that option. We don't have that option. The real question for us is it better to stay in this abusive, high-tension, high-stress, agitated home, or is it better for our kids to leave? What researchers have known for twenty years is that it is better to go. This book has over two-hundred footnotes. If you don't believe me, I've got every single study down to who wrote it, what year, the name of the study, who published it, and the page number. You can look at it yourself.

NATALIE: Yes. This is a well-researched book. I was so impressed.

GRETCHEN: In fact, for those of you who aren't convinced, if you want a little bit of a taste of it, go to my website and sign up for my free email list. You can download "7 Ways to End the Stigma of Divorce in the Church," Where you'd go is lifesavingdivorce.com/courage. Sign up for my email list and you'll get an automatic email coming back to you with a link to "7 Ways to End the Stigma of Divorce in the Church."

Another thing you should know about kids that has changed in twenty-five years is... Remember they used to say if you get divorced then you are dooming your children's marriages because they will be more likely to get divorced? We heard that over and over again. Twenty-five years ago that was true, but it is not true anymore. Now, I'll give you the exact stats. The man who did the original research twenty-five years ago is still alive and well and still researching this topic. He just updated his stats last year and he said, "As of now, most adults whose parents divorced do not divorce. In fact, the majority of people whose parents divorced have lifelong marriages." Let me give you the exact stats for those of you who like numbers. 45% of adults whose parents divorced got divorced themselves in the study. 41% of adults whose parents did not divorce got divorced. So do the math here. We're talking about only a 4% difference. So four in one hundred is negligible in my mind. That's not a good reason to stay.

NATALIE: You know what? When I think about my older kids who watched the whole thing and understood exactly what was going on, if you talked with any of them, they all have more relationship understanding and emotional intelligence than I ever had when

I was their age. I think they are more apt to see or recognize a pathological relationship and avoid getting into one. One of them for sure says, "I don't even know if I will get married, but if I do, I'm going to make sure I know this person inside and out." Back in our day, we felt pressure even from Christians to just get married. "You are twenty! Get married!"

GRETCHEN: Right. That is what the message was, yeah.

NATALIE: Yes, and that is so stupid when you think about it. So many of the women I work with met their man at church and got married when they were in their early twenties without even really understanding who they were as well as who their partner was.

GRETCHEN: Yep. No life experiences. Then we were given the message that any two people who were Christians, God would protect their marriage and God would make their marriage happy. Or if not happy, that it would be a good marriage.

NATALIE: Right. All you needed to do was to make sure the other person was a Christian. If you could check that box, you were good to go.

GRETCHEN: Right, and boy was that naïve! Let me throw in one more. Like I said, chapter seven in my book on kids and divorce is just packed full of quotes and data and important information. One of the things we were always threatened with was that our kids would have drug and alcohol problems. I went to a longitudinal study, and here's what I found. First, your kids are not likely to have drug and alcohol problems if you divorce. The vast majority of kids in America, even in single parent or stepparent families, do not have any substance abuse problems. For those number geeks out there I will give you the actual numbers. Only six in one-hundred adolescents in single mother families had substance abuse problems. That means ninety-four in one-hundred single mother families had no substance abuse problems. Should we look at two parent families? Only five in one-hundred adolescents in two parent families had substance abuse problems, and ninety-five in one-hundred two parent families have no substance abuse problems.

Again, this is negligible. A one percent difference. Is that worth keeping your kids in that home and having them observe you being abused or experiencing abuse themselves? The Ace study from Kaiser-Permanente in 1998 told us if our kids were either experiencing themselves or observing sexual or physical abuse, their parent being abused, or there was substance abuse in the home, if they saw enough of these adverse childhood events that it would effect their adult health. Why didn't anyone tell

us this? They just told us that we had to stay, pray, try harder, forgive over and over, and always go the extra mile. They completely concealed from us the damage this was doing to our children.

NATALIE: That's just the thing. Divorce is just a symptom of a much more insidious problem. When kids grow up being traumatized in that way, that is what leads to things like substance abuse, eating disorders, and other kinds of pathologies. It's not divorce. Divorce is just a symptom. Divorce is what happens when there is something very dysfunctional going on in that marriage.

GRETCHEN: My children would tell you that's true. They have both individually come to me and said, "I am so glad you divorced dad because our lives would have been really tense and dysfunctional had you not." They have expressed that more than once. I do want to bring up one other topic on the importance of divorce in society. Again, it is strange to be this nice Christian girl promoting divorce, but it is literally life-saving. Prior to 1969, you had to go before a judge and prove via airtight evidence, usually collected by a private investigator or something, that your spouse was cheating on you, had been drunk and missed work a certain number of days, or things like that. You could go hire an attorney and go to court and the judge could say, "No, I don't think you should get a divorce," and send you right back to your abuser. Then in 1969 starting in California, Governor Ronald Reagan signed the first no-fault divorce bill in the state of California. From that point on, all the other states fell in line over the next thirteen or fourteen years. Almost all of them passed no-fault divorce. As you know, there is no federal divorce law in the United States. Every state has its own variation on it.

But researchers said this is a moment in time where we can see what happens when you allow people to divorce for any reason, irreconcilable differences, and they don't have to go before a judge and prove how badly they were beaten or how contemptuously they had been treated. The researchers all lined up and the family sociology researchers just watched. Because they knew when no-fault divorce went into effect in every state, an amazing event in human history, over time they saw the suicide rate of wives decrease by about 20%, the domestic violence rate by and against men and women decreased by about 30%, and the homicide rate against women by intimates decreased 5-10%.

So if your pastor or your church leaders are telling you to stay, they are putting up barriers to a lifesaving divorce, they are in some form sending you messages that are increasing suicide, domestic violence, and homicide. We just cannot do that. I want to reach out to any pastors or church leaders who are listening to this. Stop it! We cannot be promoting these messages any longer because we are killing people with these

messages.

NATALIE: I want to close with one last question. I'm wondering if you have ever talked with a woman who has been divorced, who is maybe five years out or more, who looks back and really regrets it. They really wish that they had never gotten divorced.

GRETCHEN: Yeah, I have. It's really rare. I would say that in twenty years of doing divorce recovery work that I only know one, and she was a woman who filed for divorce in an effort to get her husband to proclaim his undying love for her. What she was doing was threatening him: "If you don't behave better or show more love for me..." He was actually a decent guy. She never, ever said that he was abusing her. She threatened him with divorce and then went through with it. When he didn't step up to the plate and fight for her love, she wished she hadn't done that. She wasn't being abused, and she didn't think that he would have divorced her had she not filed first. But that's the only person, believe it or not. But perhaps you've heard other stories?

NATALIE: No, I haven't. I think that one is unusual because it wasn't... I was thinking more for my listeners who are in abusive relationships, but I was just curious if you had known anyone who had been abused who actually wished that they had stayed or who looked back and thought they could have maybe made that work.

GRETCHEN: Even the most abused women who are poor and living on the kindness of strangers, they are so happy to be out. They don't have the wealth they had before. They don't have the fancy house. But they aren't being beaten. Their children aren't being molested. They feel peace and calm and they would tell you they have no regrets.

NATALIE: That's been my experience. I've talked to a lot of divorced women and asked them if there was anything they wished they had done differently. There are things they wished they had done differently, but yes, same as you, they aren't as stable financially as they used to be but are happy to be out. I have a local friend who has been working multiple jobs and living in an apartment, whereas before she lived in a nice house and was a stay-at-home, homeschooling mom. She is really struggling but says, "No, my life is way better now than it used to be. I would never go back in a million years."

GRETCHEN: In twenty years of doing this and talking to hundreds of people, there are absolutely no regrets.

NATALIE: Yeah. Life-saving indeed. I'm so glad that you wrote this book. Even if you are not thinking of divorce for yourself but you want to educate yourself so you know how to talk to others who are thinking about divorce or who are divorced... I think this book

is a huge mind-shift for people, and it needs to happen in our church. We need to be aligned with what Gretchen shows in this book so that we can be life-giving to the people who are being abused, who are being mistreated or manipulated, as well as those who are already out. They have gotten divorced and are looking to find their place in the body of Christ. They deserve to have their place in the body of Christ. That's what they were created for, so we need to get them back in there and lock them in. If they are feeling like they are being rejected just because they had a life-saving divorce, that needs to end.

GRETCHEN: I just have to throw in one last comment. It is available as an eBook for \$7.99, but the full book is pretty thick. The full book is \$18.99. But would you believe half of the orders for this book are multiples? They are buying more than one. They are buying one for a pastor, for themselves, for a friend, for someone else in leadership, or someone who is struggling in a marriage. Probably one in five orders that are placed are actually large numbers, five or more. I think some pastors or churches are really jumping on this and saying they need to re-educate their staff.

NATALIE: Yeah. I love it! If you haven't gotten it, you need to go out and buy it now. It's on Amazon. I'll put a link in the show notes, or you can go to Amazon and look up "The Life-Saving Divorce" by Gretchen Baskerville. Thank you so much again, Gretchen, for being willing to come back here and share with Flying Free listeners. For the rest of you, thanks for listening. Until next time, fly free!