

## WHEN YOUR CHRISTIAN HUSBAND YELLS AT YOU ALL THE TIME

*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 74 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have a survivor with me, and she is going to share her story. Her name is Kathryn. Welcome to the podcast, Kathryn.

KATHRYN: Thanks, Natalie.

NATALIE: The first question is how did you meet your husband, and did you notice any red flags before you got married to him?

KATHRYN: We met in college. I kind of laugh because I was being as rebellious as my rule-following self would be. We met through fraternity/sorority things. I really wasn't supposed to be hanging out with the frat guys according to my parents. I didn't party at all, but it was the heart of it all. I thought, "I'm just going to be there." But that's where we met. I think at the time, looking back, he was a little immature, which I didn't think was a big deal because we were all young. I guess, looking back, noticing someone was immature was probably a bad sign. At that time he didn't have a great work ethic, and he was newly converted according to him. That's what he told me.

There were probably more glaring red flags that I kind of skipped over. For example, he was kind of pushy a bit physically, more than I wanted to be or felt was right. He was very over-the-top dramatic. I hadn't been around a guy like that, so I was kind of intrigued. But looking back, that's probably a red flag. I think, looking back, I thought that what he presented as private was probably more defective about himself. If I asked questions and he said, "I don't really want to talk about that," I just took it as being private rather than as, "Well, I'm just not going to tell you about that part of myself." This is funny, but he lived at home for a while. We dated for several years but I could never use his bathroom when I went to his house. Even if he knew I was coming, he never cleaned his bathroom. Looking back, that's like a thing. You couldn't clean a space for me to use the bathroom?

NATALIE: That is a thing!

KATHRYN: I guess in my mind some people are just messy and others are glitter

painted. At the time it wasn't a big deal but looking back I think it was a bad thing.

NATALIE: Kind of strange. What were some of the ways after you got married that he emotionally or spiritually abused you throughout the course of your marriage?

KATHRYN: It was funny thinking about this because it was hard to narrow it down. I can give you examples from lots of places. I know spiritually a lot of what was the most damaging is that he would use verses to condemn me when I questioned him or disagreed. He was very intelligent, so it was quite easy for him to pull out scriptures and say, "Oh, you are doing this, or you are in this sin now," and switch the focus to how horrible I was. He was good at quoting back to me if I had ever confessed a struggle or a flaw that I saw in myself. He was good at parroting those back to me. "Oh, look at you. You said you had that problem. Now look, here you are doing it again." He was good at that.

Also spiritually, he made going to church so unenjoyable. I was converted from an early age and had always treated Sundays as completely sacred. I've always loved going to church and being there. My day is always set apart in ways, and he just made it so unenjoyable. Looking back, he never helped get the kids ready, which was kind of okay because I thought I could do that. But then he would intentionally wait to get ready or he would wait until I was about to get in the shower and then he would say, "Well, I'm going to go first," and then make us late.

I didn't realize it until we separated. I don't even know if it was a conscious effort on his part, but it was the one day that I needed us to be on time. And he just wouldn't do it. At one point I did say, "Let's take separate..." I would start leaving him and taking separate cars. But of course, when we got to church people would start asking, "Why are y'all in separate cars?" That sent him reeling and saying, "We can't do that. People are talking! You're making us look bad."

NATALIE: "Yeah, well, my husband is still in the shower." "Hey, if you don't want to take separate cars, then get out of the shower sooner."

KATHRYN: Exactly. I ended up just hating going to church. I had never felt that way my entire life, in thirty something years. It was the last few years we were married that I thought, "This feels awful to go to church." But I think he knew my faith was a rock for me. I don't know how consciously or intentionally he was trying to tear that down, but it was the one place that I could go to try to find solace. I feel like he went after that even if it wasn't intentional. It was just somewhere that he had to go.

To me, that was one of the hardest points because you can't help it, you start to see... I don't know if everybody does, but I felt I did. I saw this abuser who saw nothing but my flaws and nothing but what I did wrong. It's almost like God kind of morphs into that. It's like the Israelites kind of saw God as a pharaoh because they just couldn't get out of that mindset.

NATALIE: Right.

KATHRYN: I felt like God was kind of that way too. "Geez Kathryn, look. You screwed up again. Here you are. Same sin, same character flaw." I think spiritually that was the most damaging thing. I don't know why my brain did that, but it just morphed God into this constantly disappointed and constantly angry presence. Or completely far away. If my husband could get mad at me and not talk to me for three days, then maybe God felt that way too.

NATALIE: Yep. I think that is so common for women. I can relate to that.

KATHRYN: For me, I was constantly begging, "Give me the grace. Make me better. Help me to be pleasing to my husband. Help me to be a light to my family, to be something that brings life." The way he made me feel was that I was the poison in our family and that I was poisoning everything instead of breathing life into it. It's hard because you are begging and crying out for years and years, and there is just nothing. I thought, "Well, maybe God has turned His face from me." I even went as far as to think, "Well, maybe I'm not a Christian. Maybe God didn't love me all these years."

NATALIE: Yes. I thought the same thing. I remember literally thinking, "Maybe I'm just a Christian-want-to-be." We went to Piper's church and he taught the Calvinist theology. They teach that if God chooses you, if you are one of the elect, then you will become a Christian. And if you are not, then it doesn't matter even if you want to, you just won't be. I was terrified at that point thinking that maybe I was just a Christian-want-to-be and God hadn't chosen me. It was one of the darkest points of my life, I think. It's sad. So sad.

KATHRYN: It was funny as I was thinking about this. The one glaring example I have for emotional abuse, if someone is having a hard time tangibly grasping that, was early on in our marriage. He loved the phrase, "I can't believe this is who I married." It was very cutting to me. But one instance was that he quit wearing his wedding ring for a while. I'm sure I didn't communicate this the best, but I went to him and said, "I get it. Some couples don't wear wedding rings. Maybe I'm just insecure." I tried to go in there with a meek personality. "But it really hurts my feelings that you are choosing to not wear

your wedding ring." His first response was just furious. He was so furious that I brought it up. Then suddenly, the conversation turned to him crying and saying, "I can't believe you are accusing me of doing something. I've never even looked at other women."

NATALIE: Unbelievable.

KATHRYN: It was that, and then it was how horrible I was that I was making assumptions about him. Then there was that phrase, "I can't believe who I married." The inventory of the conversation was that he wasn't wearing his wedding ring. I told him, "That hurts my feelings." His first reaction was to be confrontational. He blamed me for it. Then he made accusations about how I felt being hurt by his not wearing his wedding ring. So I left that conversation feeling guilty for having accused him of something and being ashamed for being "insecure" because he was choosing that. I think that sums it up. Any big issue we had, that is how it went.

NATALIE: I am so glad you shared that and spelled that out because there are women out there listening and thinking, "That is exactly what I experience on a regular basis." The other thing is the comment, "I can't believe I'm married to you" is such a... What that is basically saying is, "I can't believe I was so stupid to marry someone like you. What was I ever thinking that I would ever marry someone as (fill in the blank) as you are?" It implies so much degradation and shame placed on the other person. It is just unbelievable.

KATHRYN: Right.

NATALIE: So what coping strategies did you use? How did you get through, and how many years were you in that?

KATHRYN: Before it was final, we crossed our eleventh year. But we were separated by that point, so it was ten and a half full years. It was a progressive thing. But we accomplished a lot in ten years. We have three kids. I had three miscarriages. Both of his parents died before we were thirty. It was a lot. For him, I feel like it progressively got worse and worse. Looking back, he started gaslighting me when we were dating, badly on our honeymoon, and then it just snowballed from there.

So coping strategies. I'm sure if there is a master list, I could probably check off all of them, Natalie. I really think I could. I turned to food. That was a thing. He only likes bad junk food, so to not deal with his rage, that is what we ate because it was easier to not fight about food, which didn't help five-foot-three-me stay healthy. I became depressed. I spent time throwing myself into those supposedly helpful, wonderful, help-Christians-

do-better marriage books. What I've decided is that over the years I was just grasping for hope. I just needed hope that it would get better, that he would find love for me, or find something favorable about me to bring out kindness.

What I was really doing was treating hope like it was grace. If I hoped enough or if I worked enough then God would give him the grace to be different. That's where that fell. I guess some of the lower points... That depression took over. I hadn't struggled with it when I was younger, but I started cutting. It was crazy. It's funny how long you will stay in even after you realize you've gone off the deep end. I can remember thinking... He always had the same complaints. Over and over again it was a huge deal, even if it was a minor thing that I forgot to do like dinner wasn't ready when he walked in the door. I remember my thought process that maybe if I could put scars on my skin, I could remember what upsets him. With them it was constantly changing, so it's not like that could ever accomplish that.

There was a point where I realized that he didn't really love me because... I started to get scared that I was cutting. I don't know why. I guess you think that if they can see you harming yourself like that then they will snap out of whatever it is they are doing. So stupid me told him at one point, "Hey, I've started doing this. I don't want to do that. Can you please, if you have issues with me, just address them with more kindness? You don't have to not tell me if I'm doing something wrong, just be gentler or kind about it. Don't yell." He ended up yelling at me. He told me that I was being melodramatic and I just needed attention. Maybe a week later it became a pretty little bookend when his fights with me would end with, "I wish you would just slit your wrists and then I wouldn't have to be married to you." That's where we were.

NATALIE: I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry that you had to go through that.

KATHRYN: At its lowest point I became suicidal, which is crazy. Sometimes I look back and realize I had all these low spots. But I realize that God was always there in the midst, which is amazing. But I was truly suicidal at one point and he yelled at me. I don't know why but you get in these upswings with them where you think, "Oh, we're making progress, so I'm going to tell you about this really dark time because it will help you understand where I was." He yelled at me about that. I could have saved him from being married to me if I had just gone through with my plan. He wasn't a nice person.

NATALIE: No. No, that's an understatement! Did you ever think about the word "abuse"? When did you finally realize, "I think this is abusive and this is not something I can do anymore"?

KATHRYN: It was a long process. What I consider to be my rock bottom... I was completely isolated from my family. He did a good job of that. I felt away from God. I was working at that point. I say it was an affair. There wasn't anything physical to it. But I really had feelings for this other man. That is where my rock bottom was. I had this bittersweet relationship with that sin because it was wholly wrong. But I remember so vividly that there was this moment where he told a joke and I laughed really hard. Then I started profusely apologizing for laughing. He looked at me and said, "I just told a joke to make you laugh. Then you laughed. Now you can't look me in the eyes. I don't understand what happened." It was this lightbulb moment of realizing that I wasn't allowed to laugh. Then I thought, "I'm not allowed to laugh? What is that?"

Again, it was wrong. But it was also the lightbulb that went off in my desperate grasp for hope of something because you really get that your husband doesn't love you, given our history. You feel like God doesn't love you. "But this person is at least nice to me and likes being around me." So I grabbed an idol and thought that it would help. As God in His mercy does, He exposes all our things. It went on for about three months and then my ex-husband found out about it, which exploded everything. It caused a lot of cognitive dissonance because I'm married to this person who doesn't want me, who consistently talks about how he wished I had killed myself. Then there is this switch to, "I love you. I can't believe you betrayed me."

It was a moment where I thought I was crazy. "All this was in my head. He wasn't that bad. Look how much he loves you, how heart-broken he is." It was weird. But I found Flying Free and I read Leslie Vernick's book. That was probably where it really started to click that this was abusive. "I'm not crazy. I didn't make all this up. It's not in my head. These were real issues and real problems. Things absolutely must change." That's where I was.

One of the biggest for me was that I had been with y'all... I hadn't joined Flying Free, but I had been with the group and reading your stuff and started reading through the books about emotional abuse. I decided that as I was homeschooling three kids and the ex was in the house all the time because he wasn't working, I thought, "I just need space." I have a mentor who has this farm out in the middle of nowhere. I said, "I just need time away from everybody." She said, "Go to my farm. Go out there and do what you need to do."

So I took a weekend of solitude. Nobody else was out there. I prayed and I fasted. I felt like Jacob. I said, "This is it, God. I am not letting go until You bless me, until You fix this marriage." What was so beautiful is that it was the first time I was there. I don't usually pray out loud, but I was screaming inside of this cabin by myself talking to God. It

ended up being beautiful. It was so clear in my mind. It was like I had my hands in God's robes saying, "You're going to fix this. This is not going to fall apart."

There was this moment where He hit me so hard with it. Here I was with my hand in His robes like when your toddler starts throwing a fit and you are holding them in your arms and you are smiling because you love them anyway. "You just pitch your fit." That's what it felt like. He wasn't warring with me. He was holding me, and He had been holding me the whole time. That was the moment where I said, "Okay. I don't know where you are going with this. I don't know how it's going to pan out. But God has me and I can trust that." It was beautiful. It ended up being a great weekend. It restored that relationship with the Lord that I thought had been lost. That was like a whole year long process of really coming to terms that this was not a good relationship, this is an abusive relationship, "I'm probably going to have to get out of this relationship."

NATALIE: What happened after that then? Obviously, you filed for divorce. How did things go after that?

KATHRYN: We spent that weekend away. I think it's funny. God must laugh at me because I was like, "Okay. I'm going to set these strong boundaries with him. If he's still not shaping up by this date, then I'll ask him to at least move out." He blew through every boundary that I set. I think that date came and went, and then something terrible happened. Then I said, "Okay, I get it. But are you sure, God? Are you really sure that this isn't going to just magically turn around?" I set some more boundaries, and then that date came and went. He really did some stuff and then we separated. Then I filed for divorce. I felt like God was just laughing saying, "I am very clearly closing these doors for you, Kathryn."

NATALIE: How bad does it have to get, right?

KATHRYN: Yeah. It was funny because every time I set a deadline I thought, "But he could change." That's all you hear, right? Hold on to your little ounces of hope that he is going to change. Every time I let it go something worse happened. Finally I said, "Okay. I'm done."

NATALIE: So, is your divorce final?

KATHRYN: It is final. It was final in January.

NATALIE: Okay. How have things gotten better since you got out of that relationship?

KATHRYN: Goodness. God gave me something very tangible, as someone who has to kind of know I'm doing the right thing. I think He knows me well enough to know that I need that. Something that was extremely tangible for me was the day I filed for divorce and told him. I told him in a safe setting. But I told him and then got back to the car. I was crying so hard. Suddenly, I took this deep breath and I didn't even realize I had been carrying this jagged rock in my chest that made every breath painful. Still, six months later, I still take this deep breath and realize that I do not feel that rock anymore.

NATALIE: That's amazing.

KATHRYN: It has been a huge blessing. You get caught up in doing mediation and doing all that stuff. I have already started to see a difference in my kids. I have a ten-year-old who is the oldest. It's like seeing him come back to be the little kid that he was. He is smiling. He is laughing. He is doing more things and interacting with people. I feel like your kids hold you tight and you don't want to mess them up. But I really feel like they are getting better. They are still angry. They are angry at me because they are used to me fixing everything. But I am still seeing glimpses of who they were before all the craziness set into their personality.

NATALIE: Yep. As you heal and get stronger, that will totally rub off on them and you will all be able to exhale. It will just get better and better. It's so ironic that so many women, that is one of their biggest fears, especially if they have little kids, that their little kids will go to hell in a handbasket and turn out bad. The statistics just do not show that anymore. Gretchen Baskerville, author of "The Life-Saving Divorce," goes into all of that in her book. But I don't see that either. I don't see that in the lives of my younger kids. My younger kids are so much happier and so much freer. They don't spend all their time with me. They go back and forth. But they get that break because there is such an oppressive feeling when you are around someone who is negative, who is constantly criticizing you and constantly saying "no." It's oppressive and they feel it.

When they are at my home, there is no feeling like that. It's free. They can be who they want to be. They can have a meltdown and nobody is going to criticize them or make them feel like they are sub-human because they are children and they act like children. I hope that encourages someone out there listening who is... I'm not encouraging everyone to get a divorce. I encourage people to make their own choice about that. But if you do need to get out of a relationship and the one thing holding you back is your kids, do some more research. You might find out that the reality...



Here's the thing too, if you want to put a spiritual spin on it. Everything is always the opposite of what's true with the enemy. So he's going to tell you lies that are the exact opposite of what is on the other side. He's going to make you think that if you cross that river that you're going to get to the other side and it's going to be even worse than it is now. The opposite is true.

KATHRYN: Yes. Something I told myself a lot was that I cannot make a decision or make a mistake that will ultimately change God's plans for my children. I'm just not that powerful. God works through all of that. I clung to it. Maybe I will make mistakes trying to help them heal and move forward, but ultimately God loves my children and I cannot change His plans for them, not with anything I do.

NATALIE: Right. So if you could go back and talk to your younger self, what is one thing that you learned through this whole process that you would let her know?

KATHRYN: I think one of the biggest things is truly getting down to the nitty-gritty of who you are in Christ and that you are this beloved child all the time because of Christ. That moment you lose the truth about who you are you become an easy target. In my marriage, losing that also helped my husband continue in what he was doing. It was like, I don't claim respect because of who I am or some merit but because of Who God is and who He made me to be. The God of the universe, Creator of all, the Mighty One, the just Judge of all the earth, the Alpha-Omega, the all-knowing, all-seeing, holy, holy God says I have intrinsic, undeniable, priceless worth. And I am due kindness and respect because of that and on that alone. I wish I had that confidence and strength years ago.

NATALIE: That's beautiful! It really is the key to healing: finally coming into your true identity of who you are and learning how to embrace that person that God created you to be, because your spouse is not embracing that person. Your spouse is putting graffiti all over your personhood, and it's graffiti that says horrible, horrible things about you. He is just defacing the creation of God. That just isn't God's plan for His daughters at all. That's not God's plan for any of His daughters or His sons. One last question. What piece of advice would you give to someone who is listening right now and wondering if they should leave?

KATHRYN: There are so many things I feel I have learned. I think for me it was that, being patient... it does still take a lot of waiting even while you are trying to make that decision. If you can be physically safe and take it step-by-step and have the conversations with the Lord of, "This is what I'm looking for if You're going to..." Not in an ultimatum, but "This is what I'm looking for. Make it clear. Make me see. Is he

changing? Is he playing a game?" That takes time.

I walked away feeling completely at peace with every step that I took, and I still feel that. I feel that it is because I took that time and was patient. Even though I think I knew deep down that it wasn't going to work, for me that was the key to not having any kind of regret or questioning. I don't ever look back over my shoulder and think, "What if I didn't wait long enough? Or what if I didn't do this? Or what if he just needed more time?" I never felt that way, and for me it was because I took the time, started working on myself, seeing if I could stay, putting it through the lens of, "Can I stay with this person and exercise my gifts freely? Can I be who I want to be as a reflection of God and not get in trouble when I come home? Are there going to be negative consequences for me being who God made me to be with this person?" Unfortunately for me, I couldn't be who God created me to be with that spouse.

NATALIE: I love that! I think that's great advice. A counselor told me, "Make that decision when you know for sure, for sure, for sure, and not before." I thought it was good advice, and it did make me wait a lot longer, too. Looking back, I wish I would have left sooner. But like you, I also don't have any regrets. I know that I did not leave one single stone unturned. In fact, I turned over every stone multiple times just to make sure there wasn't something salvageable under there. There was nothing.

That's when I finally filed. Once I filed... Like you were talking about, there was this sharp weight, this huge weight lifted. I really did feel free. I felt the pleasure of God on me like I was finally walking in alignment with God's will for my life. It was a beautiful thing. Then nobody could change my mind. Nobody. People could slander me, malign what I did, say that God was against me, but I was so confident. How could they know? They can't possibly know what God is telling you to do.

KATHRYN: My dad is a pastor. My family was a huge "stay together no matter what." God has been really good because I had to face that. "They are going to disown me," but I couldn't let it go. I knew where God was calling me and I had to go. I thought, "Take everything, but I still get Jesus." My parents didn't talk to me for about twenty four hours. Then my dad called me and said, "Sugar, I don't know what to tell you other than this: God is moving in my heart and I've completely changed my mind. We need to talk. I love you. I support you." It was great. It's probably the closest my parents and I have ever been.

NATALIE: That is absolutely incredible!

KATHRYN: It can feel like you are going to lose everything. I'm a worst-case scenario

kind of person, so I prepared to lose everything. I feel like God has really blessed it and not put me through that. But getting my feeling back was huge. My ex intentionally created drama. I didn't figure that out until after we separated. He was creating fights between my family and I so that we wouldn't communicate. So that's been a big blessing.

NATALIE: That's wonderful. Kathryn, thank you so much for taking some time to come on here and answer our questions. We probed quite a bit. I think your testimony is going to be a huge encouragement to a lot of people, so thank you.

KATHRYN: Thank you for your work and being open and vulnerable with all of us, because it takes all of us to be that way to make change.

NATALIE: That's right. We're in this together. For the rest of you listening, until next time, fly free!