

WHEN GOD AND THE BIBLE ARE WEAPONIZED AGAINST CHRISTIAN WOMEN

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 80 of the Flying Free Podcast! Today I have with me Anne Resler. She has a private practice as a licensed professional counselor and licensed marriage and family therapist. She is also an author. She has written a study on the book of Nehemiah called "Rising From the Ruins: Restoring the Broken Places." Just the title of that sounds incredible. She is currently working on a book called "Chosen," which is a journey of healing from trauma through the lens of the stories of five women in the lineage of Christ. First, welcome, Anne. Thank you for being on the podcast.

ANNE: Thanks, Natalie. It's exciting to be here. I feel honored to be asked.

NATALIE: Anne and I got to meet each other last January 2020 before the whole COVID thing happened. I always think in terms of pre-COVID and post-COVID.

ANNE: Right! It feels like longer ago than a few months.

NATALIE: It really does. We met at Bob Hamp's conference called Reclaim, which was a wonderful time. I think he's doing it again this coming January. You work... No, you don't work in Texas. You're from Arkansas.

ANNE: I'm from northwest Arkansas. I've just done a lot of training with Bob, and he's a good friend of mine.

NATALIE: Okay. So that's how we connected, and I'm excited to have her. I want to hear more about the work you are doing right now, the book called "Chosen." What is it about? Why did you decide to write this book?

ANNE: It's been interesting. Writing is such a journey. God started birthing the idea for this study even before I was in private practice. I noticed as I studied the five women that in this line of patriarchs these women are named. I wondered what was so important about their stories that they are pointed out. I noticed the trauma stories that each of their lives told and what they really walked through to heal. I began to see how much their stories reflected so many things that women in our age walk through. There are stories that represent things like abuse; being a single mom; issues of

rejection; physical, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse.

I could see themes woven through their stories: abandonment, shame, deep beliefs of being worthless or unworthy or not enough, depression, despair, feeling unseen or forgotten, feeling unheard or not having a voice. I began to see a theme of women just longing for freedom. Even struggling with issues of infertility or deep loss and traumatic pains of adultery and rape. Their stories represent so much of the trauma that I hear in my office on a daily basis. I began to sense the Lord weaving our stories through their stories. To begin to see places of healing, breaking generational patterns and change, freedom and redemption, and how God redeemed their stories and brought healing.

Each of their stories... When I'm teaching this study, I actually draw a genogram (I don't know if you know what that is, but it's kind of a family tree where you can trace generational patterns) and you begin to see the patterns that repeat and play out. When I have worked through this with a group of women when I was conceptualizing and writing it, it was interesting to see the changes that happened in each of those women's generation, the patterns that broke. You can see that as you step back and look through a wide-angle lens at their stories. It really is powerful to me to see how Jesus heals, how He sees trauma, and how those women who are just like us He sees, He knows, He loves, He chooses, and He calls out in powerful ways to redeem. I feel like there are so many Bible studies that appeal to our intellect, which is good, but we often need to see how scripture touches the deep places of experience in our hearts.

NATALIE: I love that.

ANNE: So that's really the framework of the story.

NATALIE: When I think of the women that I've talked to, they have been so brainwashed with this and almost have a belief that the Bible has been weaponized against them as women. Some of them are scared of the Bible now. These are women who loved the Bible with all their hearts, and I think that we need more books like this to help women find the Bible to be a safe place, that God's arms are safe arms for women.

ANNE: Yes. There is so much in this work. I'm in a counseling center that is associated with a church, but we're all private practice. I get to do a lot of faith integration work which is really important to me, because I think so much of this kind of abuse, the psychological and emotional abuse not to mention physical and sexual which is so prevalent, woven in it are deep threads of spiritual abuse. To your point, so often I feel like sometimes the beginning of the work is healing an attachment wound with God so that there is a safe anchor for the healing process. That attachment first and foremost

has been just destroyed in so many ways that God doesn't feel safe, that God is a picture of an abuser in many situations.

NATALIE: Right, exactly. It's funny, because you have already touched on two of the things I wanted to talk to you about. You've already touched on them, but let's go into them deeper. My audience is mostly women of faith who have experienced a lot of emotional and spiritual abuse. If you are a woman of faith and you are experiencing emotional abuse, the spiritual abuse is just woven right into there like it's a part of it.

ANNE: Absolutely. It is part of it, yes.

NATALIE: Are there obvious patterns that you are seeing in your practice that just keep repeating themselves over and over again every time you get a new client? I guess I'm just looking for patterns that you see. The reason why I'm asking this question is because a lot of women, let's say someone who is listening to this for the very first time, really think they are the only one. I know I did. I thought I was the only one. I just want people to know that this is a thing. It's prevalent in the church, I believe, because of the underlying theology that is taught. I think emotional abuse is normalized, almost. I'm just wondering what you are seeing in your office.

ANNE: Yes, I 100% agree that it is sometimes so hard to recognize. I think that's why it is sometimes hard for people who are coming in to even recognize it as abuse because they feel like they are the crazy ones. "Why am I just not getting this? Why do I not experience the freedom that we are supposedly supposed to feel as a believer? I'm trying harder to do more." I think I notice it more in people who have grown up in more legalistic traditions where it is very authoritarian, very performance driven. Often that set up is attached to family of origin stories which makes that feel normal where performance is what is valued, and performance is how you feel love and acceptance. I think there are so many core lies that settle in attached to family of origin experiences.

Sometimes they are even the set up for getting into abusive relationships or marriages and even spiritually abusive systems. Not always. But I think about the common core lies: "I'm not enough," "I don't matter," "I'm not important," "I'm unloved," "I'm not valuable," "I must be perfect." Those are common, deep, core lies that I often think of as like a contact lens over our heart. As I've listened to women's stories in therapy, I'm listening to those themes to put in a context. Because they are like a contact lens over our hearts, we see and perceive relationships through those beliefs, and we experience God through the exact same lens. I don't take out a certain pair of contacts and put in another pair with God. So I experience God through feeling not enough, through feeling unloved.

So even if I have grown up going, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," I may know that in my head but it is not congruent with what I believe in the deep places of my heart. Those beliefs are attached to deep experiences and events, often traumatic ones or family of origin experiences or marriage relationships, that repeat over and over and continue to confirm that lie in a way that the roots go really deep. We learn ways to defend, protect, and comfort ourselves when we feel not enough.

Sometimes it might be, "I'm trying really hard to fix it," or "I'm trying really hard to be perfect," or "I'm trying really hard to perform or do ministry," or whatever it is. The roots of those lies are deeply attached to wounds that never get healed. Jesus quoted Isaiah 61 in Luke 4, which has really been the centerpiece for me in everything that I've done. "He came to heal broken hearts and set captives free." That's where it starts. We spend so much time trying to avoid the pain of the wound that the wound never gets healed. He wants us to lean into the very place that we have avoided.

NATALIE: In regard to that, what are some of the ways that you help them to do that? What advice would you give to someone who is listening, who maybe doesn't have a counselor or who has never heard of this stuff before? I'm interested in that. Also, maybe you can tie it into something you said earlier: "We believe things in our head, but it's not making the connection in our heart and causes all this confusion and pain." Is there a way to make that connection? How do you help women to make that connection between what's true with what their core beliefs are that are really lies?

ANNE: Great question! I think honestly that we've got to engage experience and not just intellect. Even in therapy, the experience of being seen, of being heard, of having someone help give words to things that you've experienced but you've never had language for... We've got to bypass our intellectual selves that try to figure everything out in so many ways and really meet people experientially. My clients teach me so much about this process. I feel like I'm still learning, but part of what I'm learning is how so many of us are... When I ask people, "Where do you feel that in your body? When that happened or what's happening right now, where are you feeling that in your body?" So many people have no idea what is even happening in their bodies.

NATALIE: Why is that?

ANNE: Again, I don't know for sure, but one of the things I suspect is that we've learned to shut down to protect for so long that there is this state of numbness. To survive, you have stopped trusting what your body is telling you, so you miss... Our bodies are so smart. They hold and store our memories and experiences. That's why you will sometimes have a visceral reaction, but you won't necessarily have language for it. But

another reason why ministries like yours are so important is that sometimes just hearing someone else's story... There's emotion that connects and then helps to find language.

It really is that sometimes we try to start a process intellectually, but we're trying to navigate it from our left brain. Our left brain is what organizes, compartmentalizes, and gives language to things. But where our wounds happen are in our experiential side, our right brain. It really is shifting to engage more of the experiential side. That can happen in a lot of ways. I love journaling. I'm a huge fan of unfiltered journaling. I always say that I don't think God is offended by cuss words because sometimes "crap" is not a strong enough word for something that we experience. That's my personal belief with God, so people may disagree with that and that's totally fine. I'm not trying to be offensive by that. But my feeling is that God is in the business of cleaning out wounds, so He's not scared of the infection. He's not scared of the pus that needs to come out that is messy and doesn't present all nice and clean.

NATALIE: Amen.

ANNE: So I think it's important for women to feel free to explore and engage their own stories, to have permission. It's amazing to me how many times my clients say, "I just need permission to do it." Maybe that is attached to the authoritarian structure that sets that up in their souls. So sometimes they need permission to engage their stories.

I started EMDR training right before everything shut down, so I didn't get to finish it. But EMDR is a specific kind of therapy that really is designed to engage trauma through a process that engages left brain and right brain that is designed to help access some of those things. I feel like I'm really trying to learn more of those strategies that help that process to create that shift to move into the experiential rather than intellectual. That is also where freedom happens with God. We can know about something and never experience it. I think that is unfortunately a huge, I even want to say a majority, of believers. That might be a stretch. I see a skewed population, so that may be reflective in that statement.

NATALIE: But those are the people listening to this podcast though, so we're all seeing it from a skewed perspective. I want to say this, though. I grew up being taught that emotions were bad. Strong emotions were unhealthy and indicative of a lot of weakness. I had EMDR therapy. I'd had several years of counseling before that which really didn't do anything. It was just me, but it didn't do anything. I found out later that I had been seeing people who were not actually licensed, so be careful if you are listening to this. Make sure.

ANNE: Yes!

NATALIE: But I did finally find a real counselor, and she did EMDR therapy. I think I only had six or seven EMDR sessions, and there was so much breakthrough in just those few. We just jumped into it because I had already had a lot of other kinds of therapy, but there was so much breakthrough that I just stopped because I didn't feel like I had anything else to work through. I couldn't believe it! I had been shut off from everything in my body and all my experiences. I had compartmentalized them over here and then my intellectual understanding of it was over here. I really did need to bring those two things together. I needed to cry. I needed to re-experience those horrible things which I kept telling myself, "That wasn't that bad."

ANNE: Right. Minimize and dismiss.

NATALIE: Exactly. Then I realized it really was that bad, and it really did affect my whole life.

ANNE: Yeah. You needed to grieve it and feel it.

NATALIE: Exactly! And now I can look back on it and think, "That was bad, but I no longer feel it or experience it anymore. It's not tied to me and dragging me down anymore."

ANNE: Yes. I think that's so important too. I heard EMDR described as a digestive system for your emotions and trauma experiences.

NATALIE: I love that! Yes!

ANNE: It gets kind of blocked, like it doesn't move through us as they are designed for them to, so it creates a kind of blockage. The process of EMDR helps unblock it. As you went through it, it doesn't even require a whole lot of talking about it. It's much more for you engaging what is happening for you and making some of those connections, pulling those threads together that are often memories and experiences that are linked to each other.

NATALIE: That was the beautiful thing about it. I only had to pick a choice few situations to work through, and they were linked. They were linked to repetitive things that kept happening in my life over and over again. But once I processed through some of those original ones, then all the other ones neutralized. It's as if they didn't have the same poisonous power over me that they had before.

ANNE: Absolutely!

NATALIE: Are you going to complete your training now, then?

ANNE: Yes, whenever it all opens back up. They moved the second half of the training to Zoom and I thought, "No, I think I'll wait until I can do it in person," because I think there is so much in therapy training that you really need the personal experiences. We were doing it on each other as therapists, so you just need that. For me, I need the experiential part of it so that I can really grab ahold of it in a responsible way.

NATALIE: Right. We should have you back here in a year and find out more. I know people are fascinated by EMDR and they don't really understand it. It would be good to have a whole session that just talks about that. I have one last question for you. I'm curious, in your practice, if there is an age group that you tend to see more often, or is it pretty much across the board?

ANNE: You know what, it really is across the board. I have clients that are in their sixties who have come out of thirty-eight or forty-year marriages. Some of them, their husbands were in ministry. Then I have early thirties just beginning to recognize patterns of destruction. Something more that I am seeing, I don't know if this is something that you guys notice, but I have found myself having to say in this day and age where I feel like sex addiction has... I don't know if it has increased or if we are just a lot more aware of it, but with the access to pornography and all the things like that I find myself saying to women, "Your body is not a drug for your husband's sex addiction."

Really, that can go both ways. A spouse's body is not a drug for an addiction. The sexual relationship is designed for safety, mutuality, and connection. I feel like there has been so much teaching in our faith systems that have taught "men need sex" and, in some ways, have totally dismissed a woman's sexuality. Like somehow we're not even sexual beings. I think it has even blocked some women from discovering their sexuality because the sexual relationships have been so destructive and have felt so objectified that it feels like it's their job, and there's not the concept of mutual connection and intimacy and expression that it is designed for. That's a big thread I feel like that pulls through all the ages.

NATALIE: Interesting. I have seen in my group that most of the women are in their forties, fifties, and sixties. That's where the majority of them are. But we are starting to see younger women now. It gives me so much hope because I didn't know... I don't know if I would have gotten out sooner or not. I don't think those of us in our forties,

fifties, and sixties had any help. There was nothing out there to help us. We didn't have an internet. There were no books written about this and if there were, they certainly weren't in our church's bookshelves.

ANNE: Right!

NATALIE: So I'm hopeful that younger women are starting to see it sooner in their destructive marriages so that they can get out sooner, some of them even before they have children or when their children are smaller, and get the education and help that they need to live fully functional lives for the majority of their adult life instead of for just the end of their adult life. Although, I heard this recently and it drew a picture that gave me so much hope, and I want to share this for anyone listening who is older.

If you think about your life on a timeline from one to one-hundred... Maybe they won't live to be one-hundred, but maybe they will because we've got a lot of medical breakthroughs. I am fifty-three. If you think about the fact that the first eighteen years of your life are not really yours (I mean, they are your life, but you don't really have autonomy before you are out of the home), so your adult life begins when you are about eighteen. That's when you start to become more aware and you start to exercise your autonomy. So really, if I'm fifty-three and it started when I was eighteen, it's like twenty-some years, isn't it?

ANNE: I'm a counselor, not a math person.

NATALIE: Maybe thirty years? Yeah, about thirty years. But if I live to be one-hundred, I've got maybe fifty more years. So older women, I'm just trying to give you some hope here. You could actually have more years ahead of you as an autonomous adult living your adult badass life than you have... We can look back and go, "Oh my gosh! Think about all the years I wasted."

ANNE: Those shame and accusation messages. "How could I be so foolish?"

NATALIE: Exactly. We can let go of those because that was our training ground to get us ready for everything that lies ahead. I think it's just a way of reframing it that is much more exciting and motivating than to just be constantly looking at the past and thinking, "Oh my gosh, my life is over." I was there in my late forties thinking "My life is over!" I had thrown it all away on this horrible marriage. I mean, I had wonderful things that I was grateful for it, like my kids for example. But it's still such a downer. Anyway, I wanted to offer that for anyone.

ANNE: That is so important, too. I want to say I'm so passionate about this work because I feel like it is just so missed in the church and in a lot of counseling offices. It is so missed, and it breaks my heart for women who are screaming to be heard and continue to feel like they are screaming and nothing is coming out. No one is hearing them. So I love the work that you are doing, Natalie. I love you giving a platform and a place for women to connect with each other, to find that support, and to find the shared experiences because honestly, the rewarding part for me of this work is the incredible freedom.

When I see these women come to me in a shell and the process of watching them become and discover who God has designed and created them to be, that's the gospel in action. There's nothing more beautiful than watching a captive be set free, watching their hearts heal, and a relationship with God be restored. He is a loving and good God who cares and sees and knows. You mentioned emotions and being taught that your emotions are bad. I think that's part of the restoration process too. I think we've all been taught, "Don't trust your emotions." That's even part of, "Don't trust the red flags. Dismiss those things."

NATALIE: Exactly.

ANNE: Learning to trust what your body is telling you. Your emotions are indicator lights like on the dashboard. It's letting you know that there is something to pay attention to. And God gave us emotion! That is part of the journey of healing: reclaiming emotion in the way that God designed.

NATALIE: And He has emotions.

ANNE: He has emotions, absolutely! It's the theology that has been developed around not knowing what to do with emotions, so "let's just say we don't have them."

NATALIE: Right. Well, this has been precious. I'm so thankful that you came on here. For those of you who are listening, if you have benefited from this session, this podcast episode, this counseling session... By the way, I wish I had had an Anne Resler for my counselor. I could have saved myself so much trouble. Anyway, if you have benefited from this podcast episode, let someone you know and care about know about it. But you can also leave a rating and review on iTunes, and then iTunes will pick up on that. They will figure out that people like this podcast and they will show it to more people and recommend it to more people. That's how more people can find it. It's an easy way. You can be anonymous when you leave your review. You don't have to say what your

name is. But it is an easy way to help promote this podcast and get it into the eardrums of more people. Thank you so much for joining me, Anne. And thank you to those of you who are listening. Until next time, fly free!