

## IS YOUR CHURCH SAFE?

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 275 of the Flying Free Podcast. So today we have something a little bit different for everyone. Usually, we interview female survivors of abuse, but today we're going to hear from a man who will be sharing his experiences of abuse in his family of origin and his religious environment. But he's also going to offer some ideas for how to recognize the differences between safe churches and unsafe churches.

Our guest is Ryan George. He's the author of *Hurt and Healed by the Church*, as well as a book called *Scared to Life*. He's the blogger behind [Explorience.org](http://Explorience.org). Very clever. He co-founded and co-leads Dude Group. So women, we're not allowed to come to Dude Group. Is that true?

RYAN: Maybe on a special night, but yeah, last night there were fourteen of us around the fire until about midnight.

NATALIE: Oh wow, that's so cool. It's a spiritual adventure community in the Blue Ridge Mountains where he lives with his wife, Crystal, and his daughter — is it Deonnie?

RYAN: It is! Way to go — you got it on the first guess. You're the first podcaster to get it right.

NATALIE: Oh wow, Deonnie. Okay, that's a beautiful name. So how did you guys come about naming her that?

RYAN: We did not. She came to live with us when she was fifteen. I was actually on a helicopter expedition up in British Columbia and I get back to civilization and cell phone reception and I had a text from my wife saying, "Oh, by the way, law enforcement put a young lady in our care for this safety." We weren't trying to be foster parents, we weren't trying to adopt. I'd had all three versions of a vasectomy trying not to become a dad. But God had different plans, and 893 days later, we actually adopted her.

And the judge said, "This is a beautiful thing," but the judge we had before that was like, "I don't even know what to do with this. I've never had an adoption folder with this many documents in it, and I don't understand how this works. We've never had an adoption where it followed the pattern that it did in your life."

NATALIE: Wow. That is an incredible story.

RYAN: And now she's a junior. She's training to be a social worker so she can go help other kids who are in the situation where she was.

NATALIE: That's amazing. I bet that changed your life, too, to be a dad.

RYAN: Utterly. My therapist one time asked me, "Do you realize, Ryan, almost all of your huge breakthroughs here in my office have happened through the filter of you becoming a dad? All the abuse that you had as a kid, all the stuff that you had to figure out, you were finally able to use the right language to describe it, you were finally able to talk about it in the appropriately healthy way once you became a dad," which is something I fought against for eighteen years of marriage.

NATALIE: Wow. So did your wife want to have kids or did she feel the same way as you did?

RYAN: She wanted to have kids for sure. Throughout our marriage that became a sticking point, as you can imagine. Those are two very different ends of the spectrum. There's no compromise. It's a one and a zero computationally between kids and no kids. And so I guess we frame it now as I won it for the first eighteen years and she won it for the rest of our life, and I'm thankful she won.

NATALIE: Wow, that is really, really neat. Okay, so let's back this up a little bit and start at the beginning of your life. You've let me know on the back end that the first twenty years of your life, you grew up going to several Independent Fundamental Baptist churches — from now on in this podcast, we'll just call these IFB churches — including one where your dad was actually the pastor. So why don't you tell us about that experience?

RYAN: Several, actually. Most of the churches I attended growing up my dad was either the assistant pastor or the main pastor. My father was Catholic, my mother was Lutheran when they got married. They fought over that. So I was christened a Catholic. And then about four years into my life, they joined this IFB cult and then they got rebaptized and then I got baptized after a vacation Bible school where we had a live lamb in the foyer. I remember being so enamored that we had a sheep inside the church.

And then for the next eighteen, nineteen, twenty years of my life, I went to IFB schools, IFB churches, and IFB college. And yes, I was indoctrinated with the stuff. Have you seen "Shiny Happy People"? There's a man that's mentioned often, Bill Gothard. We were familiar with his materials. I was trained in them. I remember his books in our home. So

if you have that as a framework, that's a shorthand for what I grew up in.

NATALIE: Yeah, I grew up in the same environment, so I know exactly what you're talking about. So was your father abusive? Was he abusive in the home? Describe your father's style of abuse.

RYAN: So it depended on the victim, right? For me, it was a lot of verbal abuse, a lot of physical. My dad hung me. I remember one time it was 32 degrees below Fahrenheit, and he put me outside to freeze me to change my attitude. He would throw me. I went through a wall one time. Very physical — threatened to knock my teeth out. And then he would use scripture to say, "Hey, in the Old Testament we would have been allowed to stone you. So you should be thankful you're even alive," like it was just a loving way to come at it.

So for me, it was physical. With my sisters and my brother, he was not physical. It'd be emotional abuse, spiritual abuse. And then as you've probably heard — it's in different podcasts or whatever; it's definitely throughout my book — is we found out my dad was a serial sexual predator, and what he was doing outside our home was grievous in a different way than what he was doing to us. We're not quite sure how many victims he had. We know there's more than the ones that we know already, but we don't know when it started.

I moved around a lot as a kid. My dad would just up and leave a church and we would move. One of the churches, we had four teachers in the school and my mom and dad were two of them. In the middle of the day, November, we just up and moved to another state and the church where we were paid my dad for twelve, sixteen, eighteen months — something like that — as going away money to get a church started in Maryland, which is where a lot of his victims were.

But we don't know; was it before that? Did it go back to Tennessee? The victim zero for us or victim one that we know about by name, there's two witnesses that heard my mom say when she was presented with it, "Oh, not again." So I don't know what comes before, "Oh, not again."

NATALIE: So I'm curious — did she also experience his abuse? Was she aware that he was hurting you physically and sexually abusing people outside of your family?

RYAN: I don't know what she knew about outside of our family. It was impossible to miss what was going on inside our home. I was the oldest; I took the brunt of it. I pushed back on us being homeschooled. I pushed back on a lot of things. And that's

one of the strange things, like I tried to explain to people. The nuance of my dad is up until I was old enough to have a voice, my dad was a model dad. I don't have any complaints. My therapist has asked me, "Surely you have some memories of..." And I said, "No." I remember I beat him in a foot race on his 40th birthday. I showed him up. And it was like I ushered in an era of verbal and physical abuse after that.

My dad was kind. I did get spanked as a kid, but it wasn't like how you see it presented. My dad would take a long time to wait. He would come in, he would be calm about it. It was never in anger. I remember one time I got so scared. I got a bloody nose and he said, "Oh, you've already suffered enough." Another time I got in there and he handed me the belt and he said, "Hey, I want you to spank me for your crime," and I couldn't do it. I was crying. He's like, "Yeah, I hate doing this, so don't make me do it anymore." And I think that was my last spanking, actually.

It's still not right, as we know about spanking, but it was much kinder and it wasn't presented as an abusive thing until I started pushing back on his theology, on the rules in our house, et cetera. As I pushed back verbally, it came back physically to me.

NATALIE: Okay, so how old were you about when you started pushing back?

RYAN: Eighth grade. So I left Christian school. I was getting bullied a lot in Christian school. I finished seventh grade and then we started eighth grade. Now, it's about that time that things started to get rough with my dad.

NATALIE: Okay. So when did the truth come out? What happened? How did that all unfold?

RYAN: It's interesting. We're putting pieces together, right? And actually, in book promotion, I have a phone call to make. I've been advertising this book and I had a guy that went to my dad's church and he said, "Hey, I got more information. If you want it, give me a call." So I'm about to learn more here next week or so whenever I connect with him.

But the first clue I didn't realize was a clue was back in the nineties. So as you know, in IFB churches, they're really big on that door-to-door visitation; canvassing your neighborhood. And I was actually canvassing with my mom one time. There's a Cracker Barrel now where we were, but the lady on the other side of the door, we're like, "Hey, do you have a faith? Do you have a church? We'd love to invite you to ours." And she said, "Well, where do you go to church?" And we gave her the name of the church. And she said, "Oh, I would never go there. The pastor's having an affair."

And my mom's like, "I'm his wife. I would know." And the lady, I still remember this. I've never met this lady again. I don't even know her name. She's the stranger outside the door. And she looked at my mom and she said, "Ma'am, you don't know your husband." And that didn't make any sense to me because I didn't have any other category for it.

So then fast forward to 2001, 2002 — I should know the date, but it's weird how trauma affects your memory — we lived out in Indiana. My wife and I got a call from my dad saying he had been unfaithful to my mom with a nineteen-year-old who was — I was married in my twenties, so it was younger than me — one of my sister's really good friends. And he called it an "affair" that started after she turned eighteen. We learned later — I'll get to that — that that wasn't true.

So I just thought my dad had made some mistakes, and he wasn't verbally abusive to me anymore because now as a man; I had my own home. So I just thought it was like this phase my dad was in. And he didn't physically abuse my sisters or my brother. So we were like, "Man, something's up."

So then 2012... So my wife is the missions director of our church. She's bilingual. She grew up in South America. And she takes counselors from up here in the States down to work with women who are coming out of sex trafficking to counsel and help them. They do microloans, help them start new businesses.

But one of the things she says to the people who volunteer from America to go down is, "Hey, if you have any sexual trauma in your past, let's talk about it now because I'd much rather have that conversation here than when we're down there." And in one of those pre-trip planning meetings, one of my dad's victims is like, "Yeah, Ryan's dad — on multiple occasions." And in fact, my dad would molest her and then in front of her, he would pray and ask God for forgiveness and then tell her, "Look, God's forgiven me so you don't need to tell anybody — it would just be gossip now," which is horrible. Spiritual abuse on top of everything else.

And so that victim came to me, my little sister's friend, she's like, "Hey, would you mind going up to talk to your dad with me?" which is a huge honor to be trusted as the assailant's son to go with her. But now she's named a kid after me. Some of my handwriting is tattooed on her arm. We've created this great friendship because I was an advocate and an ally for her in a crucial moment.

But my dad negotiated with her and with me that we wouldn't tell her family or mine. And I had talked to different people like, "Hey, you got to honor the victim's story. You can't tell until she's ready to tell it." So I carried that secret for years, going to family

Christmases and 4th of July's and whatever else.

And then six Christmases later... Was it Christmas? Anyway, there was some holiday gathering at my parents' house, and my wife overheard my dad talking to two young girls. So my parents have a pool, and I think eighteen people can sleep in their house. There's people, there's multiple living rooms, there's toys. There are people there that aren't related to us coming in and out. And my wife found my dad talking to a nine-year-old and an eleven-year-old about how the women in Song of Solomon were praised for their body parts. And my wife is like, "Wait, what?"

And so she alerted their parents, but again, because they didn't know what I knew from 2012, they didn't know what I knew from 1998, so for them, it was like, "Well, that doesn't make sense with the Pastor George we know." And then the big, where we all started to finally put all the pieces together and everyone decided to start telling their story, there was a podcast dropped in 2021 of that girl, supposedly a nineteen-year-old girl that my dad had "had an affair with." Turns out it started before she was eighteen. It was non-consensual. It was gross. She had a receipt. She had love letters from him, jewelry, this whole big thing.

And so I reached out to her. I was like, "Hey, I didn't know. I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?" I talked to her lawyer. I've talked to law enforcement. We don't know the extent of it, not that there has to be any more for it to be grievous, right? It's just a horrible thing.

NATALIE: Has he been convicted? He's still out there?

RYAN: Yeah, so the one on the podcast, I talked to the lawyer, we're now past the statute of limitations. And so he's safe there. In fact, I tried to answer any question. I said, "I have no problem putting my dad behind bars. He's gross." But he said, and I'll never forget this, he said, "Man, your dad was so slick." It's just crazy. As we talked about it, it seemed like my dad knew someday this was going to come.

The other victim has chosen not to. The statute of limitations hasn't run out on her, but she said, "I don't need that for my healing," and she's living a beautiful life now. She's living proof of that's true. She has boundaries around him. He's not allowed at my house, he's not allowed at my sister's house, so she doesn't have to see him when she comes and visits people who are related to me, and he wouldn't have a reason necessarily to go to her house. So yeah, he's in limbo. He doesn't have many friends. He stays at home watching Korean TV shows and he works from home. Pretty lonely life. He's in a hell of his own.

NATALIE: Are your parents still married? What happened to your mom?

RYAN: Yeah, she is. My dad built her own bedroom suite on the other side of this massive... They had restored this massive old house. It's really pretty on the inside, actually, and he built her her own old thing. So she's got one side. She runs his business, so they've got to work together, in her mind. I still see her from time to time. I don't have boundaries around her.

But yeah, she's condoned the abuse. She's told my sister, "Ryan deserved to be abused for telling his story now," and so that's a little harsh, but my mom wasn't physically abusive. And I don't remember verbal more than just a mom getting upset on an occasion, but nothing physical or definitely not sexual or anything like that. But she told us, "I stayed with your dad after 2002 for the kids, and then I'm staying with him now for the grandkids."

NATALIE: Well, I hope the grandkids are safe because most of them don't change.

RYAN: That's my opinion as well.

NATALIE: I have so many thoughts and I need to bite my tongue right now.

RYAN: No, you're good. But no, most of my family agrees with you. I haven't seen my dad since a wedding I officiated three and a half years ago. Right after the first open COVID thing, a couple got married and he was there. But I am going to see him at a funeral here in a few weeks.

And my sisters, they're friends with both of the victims that I know about and obviously those kids, it's just like the other grandkids — like it's all these kids running around. So we know everybody's kids, and they in advance told my dad, "Don't come talk to us. You're not welcome around our kids for sure, and not around us."

My wife loves to speak truths of power. She's done it a lot in some crucial moments, and so she's like, "Yeah, let him talk to me." But the rest of us, we've put boundaries around my dad. I think half my siblings have him blocked on their phones. I do as well.

NATALIE: So one of the things that we were going to talk about is silence and how that actually perpetuates abuse and it keeps it thriving. It's like how I describe it as like mold grows and thrives in dark places. If you can just keep it out of the sun and in a nice, moist, dark place, it'll just grow and thrive and proliferate. But if you expose it to dry air and the sun, then it will die. But you have to expose it.

RYAN: That's a great metaphor.

NATALIE: So in your opinion, what needs to happen for pastors and church... Your dad is not the only one. This is like an epidemic that, I mean, there are so many stories. You've probably seen it in the news. I feel like every month there's some new story is coming to light about some pastor who has been molesting people or doing things behind the scenes.

I think that there are a lot of religious leaders who hide behind their persona as a pastor who are just very spiritually and emotionally abusive behind the scenes to their family or even to the people on the staff of their church and using God and the Bible and their position to manipulate and coerce other people into letting things go, not speaking out, "Forgive and forget," "Let's move on," "Let's not have a spirit of bitterness," "Our heart is deceitful above all else and who can know it?"

RYAN: Dude, you're quoting all the hits.

NATALIE: Exactly. So again, I've been marinating in this my entire life as well, so I'm totally tracking with you on where you're coming from. What do you think needs to happen for them to be held more accountable for their past abuse? When you're talking about your dad, I feel like he really hasn't been held accountable for his actions or his behaviors at all.

And he is, I believe as a sexual predator, he is a danger to children. He's a danger to everyone around him. It sounds like you guys understand that, but he's still out there walking around. Even though he acts like a recluse, are people still coming over to his house or not anymore?

RYAN: No, no, no.

NATALIE: That's good.

RYAN: Yeah. It's interesting. A lot of my parents' friends haven't seen the podcast, don't know. My book might be the first time, and sharing these kinds of videos on Facebook and Instagram might be the first time they hear about it. I had to go up and tell my dad's family before I'd started the book tour. I said, "Hey, I owe you guys this. You need to know this. I don't want you to learn about this from Facebook. I want you to learn about it from me and I want you to be able to ask any questions that you have."

And it happened because my cousins, they are athletes and they married attractive



young women and they've had beautiful kids. And my dad went up to visit them and I saw that and I texted my cousin. I was like, "Dude, I can't tell you I love you and your family if I don't tell you. This is the backstory on my dad and we got receipts. If you want the links, here's the links." I think now the more light we shine on my dad specifically, the more he's become reclusive. And so he's behaving, if you will.

I don't think he's healed. We tried to get my dad to get help. So the first thing my wife did alone, she went to him. They were the only two people in the space. And she says, "Hey dad," or "Tim" or whatever she called him. She's like, "I think really what you have is a problem. Why don't you go to a Celebrate Recovery or something like that?" And he's like, "Nah, you're not a legitimate member of our family, so I'm not going to listen." That was his response.

So then I went to him, and I got my sisters to sign off on this. I was like, "I want to create some boundaries." They appealed a couple of the boundaries I wanted to put in there. But I said, "For you to have access to us, if you want to be our dad, here are all the things that we need you to do. We need you to turn yourself in, we need you to tell your pastor."

My dad for years was participating in a ministry called Pulpit Helps. I don't know if you're familiar with that. But small or rural churches where they only have one pastor, when the pastor goes on vacation they don't have anybody, and so what they do is they have a like-minded pastor — it's almost like a circuit-riding preacher — that comes in and fills the pulpit. Well, my dad was doing that all over the state of Maryland, maybe in other states as well. My dad got fired from the Baltimore Rescue Mission for inappropriate comments about Beyoncé or something.

But anyway, we said, "You got to go tell all these ministries where you filled in. You need to get into therapy. You need to get into counseling," all this kind of stuff. And he said, "None of them; zero; not touching it." So what we thought was having a relationship with us would be enough of an incentive. We tried the carrot first, and then, of course, I've talked to the detective in his county and I've talked to the attorney. We're hamstrung by the law situation, right? I can't make it happen.

I want justice for my dad if only for closure for his victims, to see some sort of justice being done, but statute of limitations is statute of limitations. And now Maryland, they have all these rules. There's an unlimited statute of limitations if it was, like, one of your children or something like that, right? If it's a guardian or something... I can't remember what the language is, but these were girls that went to his church. And he groomed... He knew one of his victims, her dad had committed suicide, so obviously she had a hole

in her heart for a father figure and he exploited that.

NATALIE: Hopefully your telling your story and getting it out there and speaking the truth... You never know. Someone might decide to get brave and come forward.

RYAN: And that's part of the hope. I'm not writing this book to get a pound of flesh on my dad. I'm not writing this book for the justice. What I'm hoping is just that by shining light on the causes of how it happened... I think most of the causes of what happened in my family through my dad, through the churches we grew up that happened, obviously, these people all went to the same church as I did, or at least they did during this period of time, that it's actually a theology problem. So if I can shine light on the wrong beliefs that lead to wrong actions, if I can shine light on how these guys, the tactics they use to hide...

I talk in the book about how my dad got other pastors to cover for him. I loved your analogy. If we shine enough light in there, maybe I can't do anything for my dad's direct victims, but maybe I can do something for people who have a story that they need to tell.

My book coach, when I started writing this — she's in Tennessee, sweet lady — and she had moist eyes and almost a choked-up voice. And she looked at me through Zoom and she says, “Ryan, do you realize if you do what we're trying to do with this book, you might free women you don't even know?” I got choked up. And I was like, “Yeah, let me sign me up. Where do I sign?”

NATALIE: Yep. Everything we do has a ripple effect, and I do believe that every time we tell the truth, that we come out and we break that silence, it sets people free — a lot of people free that we don't even always know. Okay, so looking back, what are some of the red flags that you feel like you missed about the IFB churches that you grew up attending?

RYAN: I think it's bigger than IFB churches, to be honest.

NATALIE: Yeah, I do too.

RYAN: So three of the red flags that I've noticed in retrospect... I quote him in my book — I don't remember who it was — is, “You have to be careful of a church that only confesses the sins of other people and not their own.” And my dad would do that a lot. My dad excommunicated a guy for having an affair, which at least is between consensual adults, but then didn't confess his own sins. So if you go into a place and

you never hear someone in leadership say, "I was wrong about that." It may not be something gross and sinful but just say, "Hey, I was wrong about this. I got this wrong." It's like Donald Trump says, "I've never asked for forgiveness for anything," which is a huge red flag.

Another is, and you know this, I don't know what the percentage is, but it seems like the majority of presentations in IFB churches are angry. There's anger, there's angst. Just like Trump, again, they tend to dehumanize the victims or they dehumanize the people who disagree with them. "If you don't read a King James Bible, you're going to hell." That's not an exaggeration. That's an actual thing that's being presented out there.

The other thing, this sounds really funny, but an American flag in a sanctuary is a red flag to me. And if I see the American flag in a sanctuary, I'm not coming back. Because that's Christian nationalism, and 81% of white evangelical men voted for a serial rapist who's bragged about looking at teenage girls naked and wanting to have sex with his own daughter. If you can look past that and slap God on it and sell a Bible with his name on it, that's a huge red flag for me.

I'm a kingdom-over-country guy. I've been to thirty countries, all seven continents, both polar circles. Jesus is not American. I've gone to church in five different continents. I attended a church up in Canada once that had eighty-six or eighty-three nationalities in the church. My wife and I used to serve in a church here that had fourteen different countries represented by the people there. And what you realize is an American-centric Jesus is not Jesus of Nazareth.

NATALIE: No. I'm so glad you said that. I don't think we've ever gotten political on this podcast, but I feel as time goes by, I feel like that's another thing that we need to just start speaking out about because it is another form of abuse and control and coercion that's happening on a national level.

RYAN: And it gets so bad. I mean, this is documented. I'm not making this up. There's a church in San Antonio that they were doing a freedom tour or something like that — and there's all kinds of red flags about that tour — but in the church, and they gave half-off tickets to pastors. They were chanting, "Let's go Brandon!" in the church. There's a pastor, I think in Tennessee or Alabama — it makes sense — but he was saying, "Hey, after Biden got elected..." and I'm not a big fan of Biden. I'm not political here, partisan. But he's like, "Hey, if assassination is part of God's will, who am I to get in the way of God's will?" And you're just like, "Whoa."

So when you have... My wife says, and there's no hard numbers here, but if 30 to 40%

of the women in your church have some sort of sexual trauma, assault, molestation, aggression, whatever it is, and then they've got to walk past cars that have a certain name on a bumper sticker or a window sticker and they're going, "There's cognitive dissonance in this building. I am not going to be safe in this building."

We've been attending the same church for eighteen years. I don't remember an American flag ever being in our sanctuary. I think one time or a couple of times on the 4th of July they put it up waving on like the screens, like, "Happy 4th of July" or whatever, but not the jingoist, "America first," American exceptionalism message.

And you wouldn't think that's tied to sexuality. And before the Trump presidency I wouldn't have connected that, but when you look at how many things... I mean, this stuff that's going to be coming out here shortly, the documents about him and Epstein, it's gross. The article that I just saw yesterday on the madam that he hired in 1998 to bring him teenagers... It's like if you get behind that when you had other choices... Roe v. Wade has already been overturned. There were already people of faith in your primary ballot and you still chose him and you still put his name in the back of your vehicles, you're telling the women in your church that you're going to overlook and you're willing to look rape, incest, abuse, whatever else...

NATALIE: They're willing to normalize that and accept it.

RYAN: It goes beyond a political statement to a sexual ethic.

NATALIE: Yeah. It's all tied into patriarchy as well, which is a whole other... Well, it really is what we're talking about, honestly.

RYAN: Which is why I went back and listened to a couple of episodes of your podcast to prepare for this interview, and I kept scrolling trying to find another dude. My publicist told me when I was working there, she's like, "One of the things we've got going for you, Ryan, is there aren't a lot of dudes saying what you're saying on podcasts these days."

NATALIE: Yeah. Andrew Bauman has been on here a couple of times. But yeah, I don't really interview men. One of the reasons why I accepted this interview with you is because I could tell from your background that you had experienced a lot of things that a lot of women have experienced and they're telling the story. Whereas a lot of men, they kind of think that it's normal, or they're not talking about it. It serves them to be in that kind of environment, I guess.

RYAN: It does.

NATALIE: So, I mean, they like it. They're fine with it. They're not experiencing the fallout of it. But as a child, you experienced the horror of it firsthand, you're an eighth grader, and then you decide to push back a little bit, and then you get the...

RYAN: That's when I was taller than my dad. I don't know if I've ever been stronger than my dad in my life. My dad's quite strong, man. That was when I was taller and faster than him.

NATALIE: Yeah. This is just a law of nature: If you're going to be a truth teller, you're going to get slammed for it. The abusive people hate truth-tellers, and I just feel like when you start telling the truth, you get... I was excommunicated from my church for telling the truth. And also my family of origin doesn't have anything to do with me anymore.

So all of this toxic environment falls away and you find yourself making relationships and building a new community with people who aren't involved in that toxic thinking. And it is incredible. I didn't even know that there were healthy environments, that they existed because when you grow up in that kind of environment, that's all you know. It just feels normal. And then it's very typical for kids to grow up and then they end up marrying someone who also perpetuates that familiar feeling.

Okay, you and your wife now attend a non-denominational church, so I think that's important to just make note of because a lot of people who have deconstructed or have come out of abusive church environments like I have... I don't even attend church anymore. I've chosen not to. It's not that I'm not open to going to a church one day. It's just that for me for now, this is what feels good for me right now. And it feels healing and it feels like I needed that space. But some people find a healthy church and continue to love it. And some of my kids go to church and love it, and some of my kids don't go to church anymore. How did finding a healthy church help you discover what you now truly believe?

RYAN: Several things. And I think it was because of the, not that my church has anything special or non-denominational churches have anything special, but my very specific assembly, that specific group of people had a makeup of people within it, some of them are still there — I've been going there for eighteen years. Some of them have moved on to other churches and moved on to other states — but they were living the life I was never told was possible. I saw people who love Jesus in a way I've never met.

When you look at Jesus in the Gospels, everybody from any end of any spectrum, so Jew and Gentile, old and young, male and female, rich and poor, religious and non-

religious, everybody was fascinated by that guy. And we're told that it wasn't because He was super handsome or anything. He was a normal-looking... You wouldn't pick him out of a crowd.

And so I bumped into a bunch of people like that who were also living lives... So I have pastors who, for jollies, fly experimental aircraft, race, motorcycles, ice climb, and whitewater paddle. A lot of the adrenaline stuff that I do, backpacking stuff that I do, I do with people from my church, and some of them I do with my pastors. And so they were on a grand adventure that I always wanted. I didn't know that specifically was what I was wanting to do. And so I had people in my church who were like, "Hey, do you want to go power paragliding today after church?" It's just not a normal thing, right?

And the way I'm wired, I'm wired for adrenaline, and it's addictive. People say "an adrenaline junkie." It is. If I don't have it after a certain amount of time, it's probably like someone who hasn't had alcohol or their drug of choice or whatever. But I had all these guys and then we would, before, during, and after these things, we would process it through the filter of faith.

So one of my pastors used to be a wilderness guide. He has a master's in experiential education and a doctorate in ethnography, which is where you study subgroups of people to figure out culture. And so we'd be out in the middle of the wilderness. He's like, "All right, you just did something," — ice climbing, whatever it was — "you just did something you've never done. You never thought you could do it. You were scared. You were shaking. You got past it. What's something back home in your faith, in a relationship, or whatever, that you're scared of that maybe that line is arbitrary there as well?"

And so I was disciplined almost like Jesus disciplined while He's walking down the road, like, "Hey, check out this tree or check out this fish or whatever." So I fell into an assembly where not only was our pastor trained in it at a doctoral level, but they practiced it.

One of my pastors, he was the guy who was on stage this past Sunday, he whitewater kayaks in the dark in class five rapids, which is nuts. Growing up — he doesn't do it now. He's got daughters and he's mellowed out. But I said, "What happens when you come out of the raft?" He's like, "What do you mean if you come out of the raft?" He says, "Of course, it's when. You get back in the raft." He's hiking in three feet of snow to ice climbing remote Colorado wildernesses.

I've got one of my pastors who has summited the highest mountains in South America and Africa. So I'm surrounded by people where a thriving life chasing after Jesus with

everything you have is almost like a Walter Mitty. It's like they're living a type of life that... Just pinch yourself. And the adventures aren't just physical. They're relationally adventurous, they're intellectually curious.

One time I got really angry at my pastor. I flipped him the bird and swore at him. I said, "I don't agree with your theology today." We were out in the wilderness doing a thing. And so rather than pushing back, he gathered everybody that was in our group. And he's like, "Hey, Ryan's got this thing. Is this true? Let's talk about it. Let's go through the filters. What's true here? What's not true? How can we learn from this?" That's just opposite.

If I had to critique my dad in a far less way... I remember one time in high school or college, I had pictures back from Walmart, back when you see the physical pictures. And he dropped them on the floor. I was like, "Dad, don't drop my fricking pictures." And he immediately came up and he's like, "Say that word one more time — you'll be picking your teeth off the floor." So what I had was I fell into this environment where the curiosity and the kindness and the adventure was so much more than anything I'd ever experienced that I fell in love with the winsome Jesus.

NATALIE: I am so glad that God gave you that community. It's perfect for you. When I hear stories like this, it makes me worship God. It makes me realize again how big God is and that He truly cares about each one of us as individuals. He knows how we're wired and He knows what we need and He knows the experiences that we need in order to heal some of those early woundings that we've had in our life, the anecdote for some of those things. And I'm so glad that God has given that to you.

RYAN: Which is funny — so I came to this church, having the last English-speaking church I've been a part of with an IFB church, and I came every week to this church to prove it wrong. And I remember, they're like, "Hey, we're doing this eight-week study on Tuesday nights on what it looks like to be a member of a healthy church" or something like a New Testament church or whatever.

And I remember my small group leaders of that thing, I'd never heard someone say this in a church. They're saying, "Hey, we're really struggling to get pregnant. We're considering IVF. We don't know if we have the money for it because we're on staff at a church here, but we're really having a hard time believing God is good right now." And I'd never heard anybody say that, right? And then we pray and go, "God, I want to believe, help my lack of belief."

And I've had that in Dude Group. We were going around a Bible passage and one of my

close friends was like, "Guys, I really can't unpack this tonight. My wife lost her pregnancy today, and I'm blind to anything that we're talking about." And we just shut the whole thing down and just laid hands on him and prayed over him. And the guy I asked to start the prayer was a guy whose wife had lost her pregnancy two or three months earlier. And of course, he's praying in tears. We're all emotional.

And so what I've learned is to lean into the discomfort. And that's because I base jump and bungee jump and I go out on the wings of airplanes while they do aerobatic maneuvers. What I know is that the reward, the adrenal reward, all the other body chemicals we get are in proportion to how scared I am, and that becomes normative to me. So when I'm scared in a spiritual situation or a relational instance, I know at the end of this, if I lean into the fear, there's reward there.

NATALIE: That's beautiful. That's a great analogy. Some of us, I'm thinking of my audience or even me, I don't have a lot of experience with purposefully putting myself in dangerous situations where I'm going to get that adrenal rush. I don't want to do that. That scares me. But the disadvantage of that is that you don't necessarily know what's on the other end. I've had to learn from all of the emotional and just the relational kind of adrenal thing, dangers. There are relational dangers too.

RYAN: I tell people it's like trying to explain to a seven-year-old that they're going to really like kissing a girl someday, or in your case, kissing a boy. You go, "Trust me, it's scary to put yourself out there, do the hitch, lean in 90%, but it's a good time."

NATALIE: Exactly. We talk a lot in my program about leaning into pain. If you run away from pain, you run away from the emotional pain, you fight it or you resist it or you try to buffer it, like, "Well, I'll solve for this by overeating or overspending or sleeping all day or whatever," and you're not willing to just feel the pain and cry and walk through that grieving process, you'll never get to the other side. The only way to the other side, like what you're saying, is to go through it.

RYAN: Yeah, embrace the suck. I remember the first time I went to therapy, I used to wear an Apple watch and my resting heart rate was 55 that morning. And I opened the door, walked into the waiting room, and sat down, and I looked down at my watch and it was at 83, so I'd gone up 50% heart rate and I wasn't about to jump off a bridge or off a building. I've done that before. I was about to tell somebody that I was thinking about suicide and that I have a lot of pain in my life, and that was as scary to me as being upside down in a glider or whatever crazy thing that I do.

NATALIE: Yes, and that's exactly what I'm saying. The people who are listening to this,



the women who are listening to this, that's the kinds of pain that they're facing.

RYAN: It might suck for a while. I've got a buddy right now who's at BUD/S in Coronado, and that's the school where you train to be a Navy SEAL. And the stuff that he's had to do for the last year and a half, just prepare to do the most ridiculous physical feats to become a Navy SEAL this week or next week when he goes through Hell Week, I can't even imagine.

I remember one of the tests he had to do to even get in was how long can you stand in cold water before you take your feet out? And we're talking ice water. And he was a minute longer than anybody else, and it was just fine. The guy's like, "Hey, you can take your foot out." And my buddy Tanner didn't believe him. He's like, "No, no, no, you just way surpassed everybody else." And he said to Tanner, he goes, "I've got to ask you — nobody lasts this long in this tank. How are you prepared for it?" And Tanner goes, "I knew this moment was coming, so for the last year and a half, I've taken only cold showers." He embraced the suck for a year and a half for one test because the vision he had of protecting people he cares about as a Navy SEAL was that large in his life.

And I think when Jesus becomes that large in our life, when we go, "Being emotionally healthy, spiritually healthy, physically healthy is worth it to get the most I can get out of my relationship with Jesus," it starts to funnel our decisions and make them a little bit easier to make and gives us a little bit more endurance.

NATALIE: Wow, I love that. Thank you so much for sharing that story. Okay, so for people who are thinking about... Like, let's say that I thought, "I think I'm ready to go and visit some churches and look for a place that's going to be healthy," what would you say are some things I should be looking for to find a church that's going to be safe for me?

RYAN: I know not everybody's going to agree with this, but one of the things I would do is I'm going to go to their website first regardless, and I'm going to see how many women are leadership. Not how many women are on stage — how many women are in the room where it happens.

So recently we had a situation. There was a guy who served at our church who got found out to be stalking. He was taking a picture of college girls. I live near Liberty University, and he was taking pictures of girls against their volition. They weren't pornographic. In our church, immediately the elders called my wife and said, "Here's what we got. We know what we have to do, but we also want to know what other things need to be in our messaging, things we need to think about in the process for..." None

of the victims were in our church, but if people had seen him around. He'd serve prominently in our church.

And so the fact that my wife, you look at the website and she's up there. We have a female director of operations, other churches call it an executive pastor. That's just a hint. And that doesn't mean... Bill Hybel's church had women in leadership. They even had women elders, right? So it's not a guarantee. That's a green flag. If I don't see women in leadership, that's one.

The other is, and you may have to go to the church for a little bit to hear this, is when you hear a teacher say that they've struggled or fallen short or they've changed their mind. That's a big one. If a pastor is willing to say, "I used to think X..." So on our teaching team at our church, we have multiple voices. And one of the things they do is that whatever the topic is for that Sunday, they kind of look around the team and go, "Who struggled the most with that because they're going to be able to speak most authentically about it."

So two Sundays ago, we did a whole service on how do Christians handle anxiety? What is the Christian response to the anxiety epidemic in the United States? And they picked the pastor who's had panic attacks, ended up in the hospital, struggled with anxiety, and said, "You go on stage and talk about it, about how hard it is and what you had to learn through the process." So that lets me know, if a church is willing to put people on stage and say, "Here's where I messed up in the past. I made this mistake. I used to think this, and now I think that."

And then the other one is, when I first started going to our church, went out to coffee or whatever with people and asked them questions and see how they responded to that. If they know everything and they never go, "Oh, that's a good question. I haven't thought about that," you know what I'm saying? Like, are they curious?

One of the pastors at our church, before he was even attended our church, his first service he came in and he heard a guy on stage talk about how earlier in his life he'd struggled with porn, and this was the process of him overcoming his porn addiction. And he goes, "I've never been in a church where a pastor told us he had sinned, let alone sexually." And he said, "I want to go to this church," and he eventually became our executive pastor for eighteen years. He's now a consultant. He travels around and helps businesses now. He said, "I ended up here because when I walked into that church, I heard a pastor confessing a problem or a sin or whatever that he'd overcome."

It's not a guarantee, right? I mean, I've reported sex offenders at our church because humans walk in that door and things happen, and I love how our church responds to that, but there's no guarantees in a church. But if you can look for that humility, that curiosity, and the fact that they're going to consult women for decisions.

For me, the number one thing is, do women feel like their story will be believed? And if everything else in your theology says that a woman's voice is worth less than a man's voice, well, that's going to discount when you come forward, which as you know, in IFB circles and the faith we grew up in, no wonder they don't believe when a victim comes forward because that woman's not allowed to even pray in a church, right? So I just reverse engineer. So the things that were unhealthy in the church I grew up in, I look for the opposite of that.

NATALIE: That's a good, simple way of looking at it, actually. When I think about the church that excommunicated me, it wasn't just me being a truth teller. There were actually a lot of people who stood up and tried to tell the truth to all of the white male pastors that were in leadership, and they didn't listen. They vilified everyone that came forward, they made them out to be these bad, horrible sinner people.

RYAN: "You're hurting the gospel."

NATALIE: Exactly. And so there were just fractions after fractions after fractions, and then groups of people would just leave and then they didn't care because the new people with the young kids would come in. The naïve people who had no idea what was going on in that church, well, they just keep coming in and they just replenish themselves with new blood and get their money from the new blood. It's so gross.

RYAN: It sounds like vampires, but that's basically what it is.

NATALIE: That's exactly it. That's a really good way of putting it. Okay, tell us about your book. You've talked a little bit about it, but tell us the name of it. I will definitely put a link to it. Tell us why you wrote it and then what exactly it is.

RYAN: Yeah, so it's *Hurt and Healed by the Church: Redemption and Reconstruction After Spiritual Abuse*. And I keyed off of what Diane Langberg says: "All abuse is spiritual abuse," which I really like that. So everything falls under that. So the first two chapters talks about, "Here's my backstory. This is what I learned. This is my story." And then the rest of the book, what it does is each chapter takes something malignant that I was taught that enabled abuse to happen. So what I do is I say, "This is an improper belief that's taught in churches in the United States, and this is how that leads to abuse." And

then as you go through the chapter, you get to the end, it's like, "And here's what Jesus actually said, and here's what the Bible actually says about that and how everything that's in the Bible is antithetical to abuse. You can use the Bible for abuse just like you can use it for all kinds of stuff." And so that's most of it.

And then the last two chapters is about the power of telling our stories. And so I talk about what happens when we tell our stories, what's happened since I've told my story. And I tell the redemption story of the adoption process of my daughter. That's how it closes. In fact, one of my dad's victims said, when she finished reading the advanced copy, she said when she passes out the book she's going to tell people, "Read the last chapter first and see the redemption and then go back and read all the hard stuff."

But the reason I wrote it is in some ways a response to my last book. So it's Scared to Life. I was challenging people to lean into their fears because you can't have faith unless you have doubt, fear, or both. And so if the just shall live by faith, we have to lean into our fears. And what was interesting is the feedback that I got from people was that they didn't go skydiving or bungee jumping or whatever. It gave them the courage to be vulnerable with another person. I was like, "Wow." That wasn't the goal of that book at all. I was trying to get people to go explore the physical kingdom of God.

And so what if I could tell my story and get people to be vulnerable and tell their story? To report what's happened to them or to find their way — before something happens — find their way to a safe church before they have a story to tell?

And so throughout, basically you can go chapter by chapter and say, "Hey, if a church is espousing this, it's not going to be a safe place," for the most part. Not all of them, but for most of us, I would say, at least 50% of the chapters, if your church is espousing this, you're going to be wanting to keep your head on a swivel. And so what I tried to do was redeem all these different lanes of false teaching and connect them to abuse and then teach them how God has redeemed those.

NATALIE: I love that. Can you give us just one example of just one teaching that you talk about in your book? You don't have to tell us the antidote, but what's one of the bad teachings that you wanted to turn around?

RYAN: So I'll just pick one that's easier. I have a couple of chapters that are almost 4,000 words because they're so nuanced, but we've been taught correctly in most churches that Jesus wants it to be on earth as it is in heaven. That's the right thing. And I said, "Have you ever thought that anger won't be part of heaven? There's no anger in heaven." And so what I talk about is how anger, a church that glorifies anger... And you

and I have been in those churches, that where a pastor who's angry is "anointed and he's gifted of God." And what I show is actually it's the opposite of that. And a lot of angry Christians like to point to Jesus in the temple, cracking the whip. I was like, "Wait, wait, wait — let's look at that."

So first of all, He created everything. If He was so angry, He could Thanos snap and everything's gone. There's no molecules left. Two, He didn't do this more than once. He walked in there and He didn't rough anybody up. We don't hear of Him physically attacking anybody. He cracked a whip. He never deputized His disciples to say, "Hey, why don't you make some whips? Let's go in here." He never said, "Go and do thou likewise." And on the Romans Road that I was taught, and you were probably taught in IFP churches, the first verse is, "There is none righteous, no, not one." So there is no such thing as righteous anger.

And so there is justice, right? And Jesus said, "Let me take care of vengeance," which I actually like, that He's the only one that can have vengeance, and He promised, "I'm good. I got you. I'm going to take care of this."

But I go through sexual ethics of the silencing of women. I go through what I learned about even race relations, what I was taught about Black people being inferior to us. Obviously that was utterly trashed by having a black daughter. I go through all these different things of how we talk about victims. There's a whole chapter — it's called "A Denial of Dignity" — of even how we talk about people who have been harmed lets people know whether or not they're safe in a church.

NATALIE: Wow, that's interesting. I want to give a caveat about anger for people, because I've talked about anger on my podcast before. One of the emotions that actually helps them to get out is anger because they really deny their experience to try to keep calm so they can stay and keep the "house of cards" intact. And then sometimes, at least for me, my experience was I finally got so angry that I was like, "I'm not doing this anymore," but I needed that. Anger was like a fuel to get me to not be so scared, to get past the fear and the shame.

And then I have a book out too that I just published called *All the Scary Little Gods*. So I talk in that book about how eventually the anger, once I did get out, eventually the anger gets old. It gets weary to carry that burden. And so there's a place for it, but...

RYAN: But that place isn't on stage, right? That place isn't from the people who are in charge.

NATALIE: Exactly. The anger that you're talking about is what people use because they're mad and they want to control everyone, and they say that it's God: "God's angry that you guys are all being sinners, and so God's anointed me to show you how angry He is."

RYAN: It's Mark Driscoll. It's Greg Locke. It's political pundits. It's the talk radiofication of the church.

NATALIE: Yes, exactly.

RYAN: Everybody has a hot take, everybody is pissed off all the time. And that's not Jesus's *modus operandi*, right?

NATALIE: No, it's not. So that's very different than the anger... And I'm only saying that for listeners who might be like, "Oh dear, I feel angry..."

RYAN: And anger is a secondary emotion, right? So you don't feel angry first. Anger is the second thing. You feel embarrassed. You feel hurt. I mean, there's all types of things that lead to anger. And so what happens is anger is kind of like kindling on a fire. It'll burn out and then it lights the stuff that lets you start to deal with the real... What's the thing below?

Like a lot of angers in the IFB world that you know is performative. It's like lead basketball players that will go and read hateful tweets about them before the game to get that extra boost of adrenaline to go out and score forty points. It's a performance enhancer. It's not even real. I think that's different than us feeling things... Now, we still confess it to Jesus: "Say, listen, I'm feeling angry. What do I do with this?" Anger should lead us to ask the question, "What do I do with what I'm feeling?"

NATALIE: Right. Someone had described it like a dashboard of a car. It's a flashing light to give you information about what's going on with your car. So, "There's something going on inside of me. Why do I feel angry?" I'll link to a podcast episode for listeners. I did a podcast episode called "Understanding Three Sources of Anger (and why the source matters)." I'll link to it if anyone is wondering about anger or wants to learn. It's only my thoughts about anger because I have struggled with that.

So in one of the churches that I went to, not the one that excommunicated me, but a different one where one of the pastors had a very angry persona on stage at times, and looking back, this was an abusive person. And even a lot of these women who are listening, they have husbands who are very angry people and take out their anger on

their kids or take out their anger on their wives and then say that it's in the name of God or that it's righteous anger, but it's not.

It's anger that, "You're not doing things my way. You didn't keep the kids quiet. You didn't keep the kids sitting quiet in church," and what it's really internally motivated by is, "What do I look like, are people respecting me because I'm amazeballs and my family has to be in order and my family has to be well behaved?" It's all about image management and, "What can I squeeze out of this church or out of these people to make me look good and feel good and manage my life?"

RYAN: For a healthy person, anger is, like you said, a warning light. It's a trigger for us in a curious way. For people who are performatively angry, it's not. And I think those are two different things. And I love the fact that the only time that Jesus even got that angry publicly was when people were making it harder to follow Him. So, not that we should stay torqued off.

I even have to put boundaries. I follow a lot of truth-teller Instagram and YouTube podcast accounts, financially support the Roys Report and others. And I found that there are certain times that I have to turn off the feeds or move those emails because it can go to an unhealthy anger.

NATALIE: Yep, I agree.

RYAN: So I think there's good and bad to it. If it does burn, it should burn real short and it should burn us towards a curious ending.

NATALIE: Yeah. I often talk about Matthew 23 where Jesus says hard things to the Pharisees. He calls them broods of vipers.

RYAN: Whitewashed tombs.

NATALIE: Yeah, exactly. But again, His point is, and we don't know His tone of voice when He was saying it, but we do know that His point was, "You're putting heavy burdens on people and that's not my heart. The heart of God is to set people free from those heavy burdens. And that's why I'm here to show you God's love and kindness and compassion." It's the kindness that leads us to repentance. It's not fire and brimstone and beating people up.

Well, this has been a great conversation. I'm so glad that you came on as a guest. I get a lot of requests for people and if I don't know somebody, it's kind of a crapshoot to what

kind of interview it's going to be. So I was a little nervous about this one because I've never met you. I didn't read your book, although now I want to read it.

So I'm so glad that you came on though. I think this was a beautiful interview and I'm so thankful that you are telling your story. I hope that there's justice for your dad and even for your mom. I'm concerned about your mom, of course, because I work with women of faith who are in abusive marriages, but also realizing that women get to make their own choices and they also have autonomy and can decide for themselves what is best for them.

But I'm so glad that your life is that you've moved into your flow, that you have a beautiful daughter and wife that are supportive of you and you're supportive of them, and that's amazing. You've got an amazing testimony. Thank you for sharing it with us.

RYAN: Thanks for giving me the opportunity to share it with more people.