

THE DECONSTRUCTION BOOKS THAT HAVE CHANGED AND HEALED MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

NATALIE: Welcome to Episode 291 of the Flying Free Podcast. When we go to a bus station, we can get on a bus and go just about anywhere we want to go. There are so many different destinations, but we need to know which bus to get on in order to get to the destination we want to go to. And often, if we are traveling a long distance, there may be several buses we need to take to get there.

Imagine getting on a bus that took you somewhere you didn't want to go. Maybe someone talked you into getting on that bus and told you it was going to be a great destination but when you got there, you realized there was no running water, no toilets, and you hate the food. And they tried to tell you that it's all good. Well, you're fine with them having their opinion and maybe they want to be there, but you were kind of hoping for white beaches, a pina colada, and a nice bath at the end of your journey.

Books are like buses. When you open up a book, it will take you to a new place. It will take you on a new adventure. Sometimes the book will take you on a journey of the imagination to a new country or a science fiction place. Sometimes the book will take you on a path of learning you've never explored before, and that path will lead you to other paths, and then those paths will lead you to even more paths, and you will be able to meander through information that delights your mind and opens you up to new ideas and ways of looking at the world.

Books shape the way we think, feel, and show up in the world. They can even influence who we hang out with and who our friends are, who we agree or disagree with, and how we approach those agreements or disagreements.

I'm a big fan of books. I've been an avid reader since I was a very young child, using the school library every week to check out and read books. A magical time of the year for me was when the Scholastic Book Fair came to my school and my mom and dad would give me some money to buy a book or two of my very own. I loved reading books to my kids, and I hoped they would all grow up with my same passion. Out of nine, two of them did.

In my younger wife and mom days, I stopped reading classic literature and fiction. Ugh! I stuck to nonfiction books written by very conservative authors, and those books took me to destinations that shaped my friendships, my parenting, my choices, and my

character. It turned out that those destinations were not good places for me or my kids. They left us starving, depleted, and anemic.

Books are important. They have just as much influence over us as people do because they are written by people with bias, people with their own programming, people with their own lived experience or lack thereof. Charlie Jones once wrote, and you've probably heard this, "Remember, you are the same today as you will be in five years, except for two things: the people you meet and the books you read. Choose both carefully." Once I looked around me and realized I was living a life I really didn't want to live anymore, I re-examined what I had been exposing myself to, and then I got rid of a few things. I even got rid of a few books.

Now, when we do this to our homes, we call it decluttering. When we do this with our belief systems, we call it deconstructing. And hopefully as we grow throughout our lives, we will always be in the process of shedding old dead skin cells and growing new ones. Shedding old brain synapses and growing new ones. Shedding old beliefs that maybe served us when we were five but are no longer serving us when we're twenty-five or fifty-five.

Now, I know there are books out there that tell us we are bad to do deconstruction work in our lives. But think about who's writing those books. It's kind of like being in the process of decluttering and having someone who loves to keep everything and has multiple storage sheds filled with stuff from the floor to the roof telling us that it's bad for us to declutter. I say more power to them, but that's not for me anymore.

I know people in their 80s who have never changed their minds about anything. They are so stuck and so stunted in their emotional and spiritual growth all because they stubbornly believe that deconstructing is somehow betraying their original faith as if our baby faith is the only good faith there is. We would never think this way about human development, but there are people who genuinely believe this way about spiritual development and formation.

The great thing about decluttering my brain and my belief system is that I get to reassess all of those beliefs that I had just taken in like water from babyhood from an adult perspective. And then I get to select beliefs that are in alignment with what I know to be true about God and what I know to be true about myself and my own values.

Okay, so all of that is my introduction to the point I want to make in this episode, and quite honestly, that intro might be longer than the point, but let's get to the point now.

A couple of weeks ago at the time of this recording, I had the opportunity to meet up in person with Dr. Tiffany Yecke Brooks. She's the author of *Gaslighted by God*, and her newest book is called *Holy Ghosted*. Now, Tiffany and I have grown to be long-distance friends after I met her while interviewing her on the Flying Free Podcast in the fall of 2022 about her book *Gaslighted by God: Reconstructing a Disillusioned Faith*.

She's an English professor, editor, and a ghostwriter for several books, and I decided to hire her to be my writing coach and content editor during the writing of my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*. If you want hear her first interview with me, you can go to Episode 192 of the Flying Free Podcast. And to get there, just go online to flyingfreenow.com/192. And then you can hear her second interview with me about her second book called *Holy Ghosted: Spiritual Anxiety and Religious Trauma* by going to Episode 271. So that would be flyingfreenow.com/271.

So Tiffany and I met up at this amazing little coffee shop near me that has an Alice in Wonderland theme with coffee concoctions like "Hatterbrained," "Mad Tea," "The Duchess' Temper," and "Stupid Girl." And we each got our own little drink and then we started talking about books about deconstruction, so deconstruction books.

And one of the things I brought up with her was my utter confusion over how her books, both of which are richly written, they cover so much practical ground, they are well-researched, they're intelligent and intellectually stimulating without being over anyone's head, they have terrific stories and metaphors and ways of thinking through all the issues, and yet these fantastic books are not being more widely recognized and distributed in the Christian marketplace. I was asking her, "Why is that? It's blowing my brain how you don't have more reviews on your Amazon accounts. Why aren't people reading your books? They are absolutely incredible. They're like little gems hiding in the woods."

So she told me that her editor explained that it is because right now there is a glut of deconstruction books out there with more coming out every year. There are these little new boutique publishing companies that are springing up and churning out deconstruction books every month. A lot of these books are not very well-researched. They're thrown together. Many of them are testimonies of people who are angry, who are disillusioned, and writing from a place of hurt and frustration.

And I just want to say right now that I get that, I've been there, and part of me still goes there easily. But when I read stories like that, I feel more dark and I feel more hopeless. I do not feel hopeful. I do not see a place or redemption and movement forward when I read books like that. And that's okay if that is the destination that someone wants to go

to. If I wanted to get on those buses and go to those places, it's nice to know they're available. But I personally don't want to get on those buses anymore. I personally do not want to go to those places.

And if you're listening and you are interested in deconstruction—you've probably already done some of it and you maybe aren't even aware of it—but if you are interested in the kinds of books that I like to read and the places that I like to go, then keep listening. Otherwise, if you're still in that really hurt place and you want to read books like that, then there are bazillions of them out there. You can have at it and go dig in.

But where I want to go and what I'm going to share with you next is I want to go to places that are just as real, just as raw, just as honest, and just as authentic, but also where healing and rebuilding and reconstruction have been taking place. So I want to go places that offer me hope and opportunities for a variety of ways forward, not just, "Let's just throw in the towel and leave everything in the dust." I don't want to go there.

So if we think about books like buses, what if we made intentional choices about what we read in the same way that we would make intentional choices about the buses that we get on and the destinations we choose to travel to as we learn about and experience the world around us?

Now, if you are in a season of deconstructing what you believe about God and your place in this world, there are some destinations that I can recommend if you are looking to travel to places of hope and options other than despair, shame, and anger. Again, nothing wrong with those places, and sometimes we do need to spend time there to process and figure out where we want to go next. But I would argue that in selecting my books carefully, I have been able to fully acknowledge, embrace, and process my anger while still traveling to hopeful destinations and still seeing many different paths and options available to me.

And so what I want to do next is share some of my buses, give you some bus tickets to some books that I've taken trips on that have been part of my healing journey, and I offer them to those of you who are interested.

Now, I'm going to be upfront with you. I personally wanted to go to destinations where I could keep my faith. I did. I wanted to let go of the parts of my faith that were destructive and I wanted to hang on to the parts of my faith that were life-giving and beautiful. So I chose buses or books that would take me to those destinations, and that is what I'm going to share here.

Now, if you're a person who's interested in exploring other destinations, maybe even other religions or maybe even no religion at all, that is a totally valid choice, but I can't speak to those buses or those books or those places because I haven't gone to those destinations, and I don't plan on doing that as of right now in my life.

Now, I've already shared with you two books that I highly recommend, both by Tiffany Yecke Brooks. And the first one is *Gaslighted by God: Reconstructing a Disillusioned Faith*. And I'm just going to read you the Amazon description of this, and I will put the links to all of these book recommendations in the show notes.

“What happens when the God we've been taught to believe in seems powerless to help us in the struggles of life? What do we do when the God we personally encounter no longer resembles the God we've been shown in narrow interpretations of the Bible?

Many of those raised in the world of fundamentalist Christianity have been manipulated into accepting a false reality that runs counter to lived experience.” This is where she got the title of being gaslit. “The result is confusion, isolation, fear, shame, and trauma, often carried throughout one's entire life.

This book is for the victims of spiritual abuse, anyone looking to reclaim their faith from legalism, nationalism, sexism, anxiety, intolerance, and other mechanisms of control utilized by God's self-appointed gatekeepers. It is for anyone who has learned that the real God is infinitely complex and that authentic faith is perfectly compatible with doubt, and that our suffering is not something we've earned.

Gaslighted by God is not a book of easy answers. It's a companion for those mourning the loss of a belief system who need their pain recognized and legitimized. Tiffany Yecke Brooks shows through stories from her own life, conversations with Christians from a variety of backgrounds, historical anecdotes, and messy episodes from scripture that there can be faith after disillusionment. But it will be a different faith—bruised, battered, nuanced, and real—rather than one wrapped in tissue-thin platitudes and three-point sermons. It will be a faith empowered to see beyond who God should be to who God is.”

Now, the second book she wrote is the one that just came out this year, 2024, called *Holy Ghosted: Spiritual Anxiety and Religious Trauma and the Language of Abuse*. Just that title of that book got me a negative review on my podcast because someone was scolding me that I would dare to take God's name in vain by saying the word “Holy Ghosted.” So I thought that was kind of funny.

Here's the description on Amazon: "How to recognize the tactics of spiritual abuse—and save your faith. Are you questioning the church of your upbringing, but want to maintain your faith? Do you want to cut ties with your denomination, but fear abandonment by God? Are you struggling with spiritual anxiety, fear of hell, obsessive religious ritual, or feelings of never measuring up?"

Tiffany Yecke Brooks first explored reconstructing faith in *Gaslighted by God*. In this much-needed follow-up, she equips readers to understand and name tactics of spiritual abuse and manipulation.

Each chapter covers a different method of control found in toxic religious communities, including legalism, indoctrination, praise, and fear, and how to identify and respond to it in a healthy way. Brooks also reframes scriptural passages commonly weaponized by those in power.

Weaving together interviews with diverse Christians and her own experience, Brooks offers a voice to those feeling isolated by spiritual anxiety. Empowered by this guide, readers will learn to trust their intuition, seek truth fearlessly, and love God and neighbor without restraint or fear."

Another thing I loved about this book is that she brings in literature. So she's an English professor, and I went to school to be an English teacher, and so I love classic literature, and she weaves some classic literature throughout this book as well. You guys, she's just a super smart, very interesting, articulate human being, and these books are so well-written. I just cannot recommend them highly enough.

All right, the third book I'd like to recommend is this book written by some obscure human being named Natalie Hoffman. It's called *All the Scary Little Gods*. Weird title, weird title. Actually, this is my own book—I'm just being facetious. I wanted to write my own story and tell it honestly and yet still offer ways of thinking about my story that would provide anchors of hope for the readers.

So I take you starting from my childhood when I was seven years old through my own journey with God and my own deconstruction process once I get into my later years. And I walk the reader through that, but I do that in such a way that the reader will be able to find her own path using the tools that I picked up and used in my own life. So that's called *All the Scary Little Gods*.

All right, the next three books are probably my top three books that really changed my life—really rocked my world and completely changed the way I think about God and the

way I think about my faith.

And the first one is called *Faith Beyond Doubt: Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and What to Do About It* by Brian McLaren. And this is the description from Amazon: "He proposes a four-stage model of faith development..." By the way, there's a course... Where did I do this? I think I do it in the Flying Free program. I can't remember now off the top of my head. I think it's in Flying Free. It's either in Flying Free or Flying Higher, but I think it's in Flying Free.

Anyway, "He proposes a four-stage model of faith development in which questions and doubts are not the enemy of faith, but rather a portal to a more mature and fruitful kind of faith. The four stages, simplicity, complexity, perplexity, and harmony, offer a path forward that can help sincere and thoughtful people leave behind unnecessary baggage and intensify their commitment to what matters most."

So I loved learning about these four stages. I could see myself and my own journey through all four of these stages, and I even write about these four stages in my book, *All the Scary Little Gods*, without actually naming them, but it'd be a fun little exercise for you to read *Faith Beyond Doubt* and then read *All the Scary Little Gods* and see if you can see little Natalie going through those four stages.

All right, the second most life-changing book that I read as far as my deconstruction process was *A Spiritual Evolution* by John McMurray. You cannot get this book on Amazon, but I will link to his website. By the way, I bought *Faith Beyond Doubt* for all my kids and I bought *A Spiritual Evolution* for all my kids and I bought the next one for all my kids as well, because these books are so, so important.

So, "A *Spiritual Evolution* is a story of transformation and growth, a journey from dogmatism and fear to freedom and love. With self-effacing humor and refreshing candor, John McMurray examines the story of God he inherited from his religious family. What he uncovers are familiar and all too common distortions that shaped his view of God and crippled his spirit.

Then, like a seasoned teacher, John probes our beliefs with a stream of relentless questions that had haunted him for years." And he really does, you guys. He asks these questions and almost every single question I was like, "Yeah, oh my word. I wondered that too." I had all these questions, but I would just shove them away. I would push them down. I would say, "Well, I just don't know. And it's heretical to even think about those questions, and I must not have enough faith, and I must be a problem." But all of these questions, he just goes to every single one.

All right, back to the Amazon review: "Religious fears are exposed and assumptions topple like dominoes, promising a renewed sense of hope, joy, and freedom. If you have been left holding the ashes of your deconstructed faith with nothing left to trust or love, then this book is for you." My faith and my hope was so buoyed up by this book. It's a phenomenal book.

And then the next book that I got all my kids is called *Love Wins* by Rob Bell. And you've probably heard of it. It's considered a classic now. But of course, in my upbringing or even in my adult years, anything by Rob Bell was heretical. Anything by Rachel Held Evans, which is the author of the next book I'm going to recommend, or Brian McLaren, also completely heretical.

And yet, interestingly enough, these "heretics," my faith in God and my understanding of God has expanded a million times what it was before because of these so-called "heretics." So I think the whole thing was twisted upside down, and I think the gatekeepers were actually trying to keep me from knowing God better by telling me lies. I think they're just kind of in a disillusioned place as well or they just don't know. They're more in that simplistic area of faith, which is fine, but I really wanted to know God better than that. I still feel like learning who God is is going to be an ongoing adventure until I die.

But anyway, this is what Rob Bell talks about in *Love Wins*, which completely turned my whole paradigm of God on its head because I was very, very fearful of God, very fearful of my children all going to hell, very fearful of me going to hell, my grandparents going to hell, my Catholic relatives going to hell, which I talk all about in *All the Scary Little Gods*.

But anyway, this is a very short little Amazon clip that says, "With searing insight, Bell puts hell on trial with a hopeful message. Eternal life doesn't start when we die. It starts right now. And ultimately, love wins." It's an amazing book, you guys. If it scares you to question the idea of hell, then I challenge you, don't be scared.

It's like you're scared of getting on that bus because you're afraid it's going to take you to a destination that you don't know anything about. Why not go explore it, okay? It's not gonna hurt you. You can always read it and go, "I don't believe that. I'm not gonna buy into that." Or you might read it and it might change your mind about who God is.

All right, the next book is written by the late Rachel Held Evans called *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. And this is her memoir, and here's the Amazon description: "Are you struggling to connect with your church community? Do

you find yourself questioning the core beliefs that you once held dear?

Searching for Sunday is a heartfelt ode to the past and a hopeful gaze into the future of what it means to be part of the modern church. Like millions of her millennial peers, Rachel Held Evans didn't want to go to church anymore. The hypocrisy, the politics, the gargantuan building budgets, the scandals. To her, it was beginning to feel like church culture was too far removed from Jesus.

Yet, despite her cynicism and misgivings, something kept drawing Evans back to church. Evans found herself wanting to better understand the church and find her place within it, so she set out on a new adventure. Within the pages of Searching for Sunday, Evans catalogs her journey as she loves, leaves, and finds the church once again."

Now, I read this book back when I was still looking to find the church once again as well, and then COVID hit and we didn't go to church anymore, and then I ended up deciding not to go back to church. And I have not regretted that decision. It's not changed my growth in my relationship with Christ at all.

I still wonder what the future holds for me, but for right now, I do not have a church. And that is after I was excommunicated from my church and also spent many years looking for a church and trying out various churches and just could not find a church home that really resonated with who I am and who I believe God is.

I just decided that I would use Sunday mornings in a different way, and now I spend Sunday mornings with my family and I spend every other Sunday morning with the Flying Higher members, and we study books and we have a wonderful time of fellowship together on Sunday mornings.

And Flying Higher, those are the women, they're divorced Christians. Many of them have also been excommunicated from their churches and have found an alternative to church. To get to that place, you kind of have to get to the place where you no longer associate... Your relationship with God does not equal church.

And I think because I grew up in church and it was so ingrained in me that if you didn't go to church that your relationship with God would suffer, I was really fearful of that because I love Jesus. But I just have to say, after three, four years of not going to church, my relationship with God has only grown. It has not suffered at all. And people will always say, "Well, what about the fellowship?" I'm like, "Well, I get fellowship with Christians every single day." It's amazing. There are Christians everywhere I go, online, in person. It's just a smorgasbord of fellowship with Christianity. So I don't have to just

find it in church. I can find it everywhere I turn.

All right, the next book is called *The Sin of Certainty: Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our "Correct" Beliefs* by Peter Enns. And actually, the next three books are all by Peter Enns. And you can follow him on Instagram if you want to, but the description of this book is this: "This book explains how Christians mistake certainty and correct belief for faith when what God really desires is trust and intimacy." Which, when you think about it, that's what the Bible says too.

"Enns offers a model of vibrant faith that views skepticism not as a loss of belief, but as an opportunity to deepen religious conviction with courage and confidence. This is not just an intellectual conviction, he contends, but a more profound kind of knowing that only true faith can provide. Combining Enn's reflections of his own spiritual journey with an examination of scripture, *The Sin of Certainty* models an acceptance of mystery and paradox that all believers can follow and why God prefers this path because it is only this way by which we can become mature disciples who truly trust God. It gives Christians who have known only the demand for certainty permission to view faith on their own, flawed, uncertain, yet heartfelt terms."

And the next book by Peter Enns that I love is called *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It*. "Trained as an evangelical Bible scholar, Peter Enns loved the scriptures and shared his devotion, teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary. But the further he studied the Bible, the more he found himself confronted by questions that could neither be answered within the rigid framework of his religious instruction or accepted among the conservative, evangelical community.

Rejecting the increasingly complicated intellectual games used by conservative Christians to 'protect' the Bible, Enns was conflicted. Is this what God really requires? How could God's plan for divine inspiration mean ignoring what is really written in the Bible? These questions eventually cost Enns his job, but they also opened a new spiritual path for him to follow.

The Bible Tells Me So chronicles Enns' spiritual odyssey: how he came to see beyond restrictive doctrine and learned to embrace God's word as it is actually written. As he explores questions progressive evangelical readers of scripture commonly face yet fear voicing, Enns reveals that they are the very questions that God wants us to consider the essence of our spiritual study."

And then the other book that is similar to this but expands on it is... Or actually maybe

this book came up first. I don't remember which one came first, but it's another book about the Bible by Peter Enns, and it's called *How the Bible Actually Works*. So both of those books really helped me to see the Bible in a completely different way and made the Bible a little more understandable for me.

And I'm someone who's read the Bible through every year for most of my life. I would do the read the Bible through in a year thing since I was a child. I would challenge myself to do that. And I went to a Christian Bible college. We were all required to get a Bible certification. I led Bible studies. I've been in bazillions of Bible studies. I have read the Bible every day. I'm one of those Christians who would never miss reading the Bible each day, having my devotions, taking journal notes on my Bible. I've gone through many, many Bibles, dog-eared, underlining Bibles. So I'm a Bible lover as well, and these books by Peter Enns have helped me understand the Bible in such a different way that has been really life-giving to me.

All right, the next book is by Beth Allison Barr called *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth*. And this is the description in Amazon: "Biblical womanhood, the belief that God designed women to be submissive wives, virtuous mothers, and joyful homemakers, pervades North American Christianity. From choices about careers to roles in local churches to relationship dynamics, this belief shapes the everyday lives of evangelical women.

Yet biblical womanhood isn't biblical, says Baylor University historian Beth Allison Barr. Instead, it arose from a series of clearly definable historical moments. This book moves the conversation about biblical womanhood beyond Greek grammar and into the realm of church history—ancient, medieval, and modern—to show that this belief is not divinely ordained, but a product of human civilization that continues to creep into the church.

Barr's historical insights provide context for contemporary teachings about women's roles in the church and help move the conversation forward. Interweaving her story as a Baptist pastor's wife, Barr sheds light on the Church Too Movement and abuse scandals in Southern Baptist circles and the broader evangelical world, helping readers understand why biblical womanhood is more about human power structures than the message of Christ."

So that's a really important book—was for me anyway—as far as understanding what I had been programmed to believe about myself as a woman and about others as women and our roles in the world and what the Bible actually teaches versus what culture and what man's ideas throughout history have taught. Which, since the world

has been largely patriarchal, you can imagine the bias there.

I have two more. One last one that I've read, and I actually did an interview with this man. His name is Krispin Mayfield. He is a therapist, and he wrote a book called *Attached to God*. Here is this book. And I loved this book because... Well, I'll read the description and then you'll know why I love this book: "We all experience moments when God's love and presence are tangible, but we also experience feeling utterly abandoned by God. Why? The answer is found when you take a deep look at the other important relationships in your life and understand your attachment style.

Through his years working in trauma recovery programs, extensive research into attachment science, and personal experiences with spiritual striving and abuse, licensed therapist Krispin Mayfield has learned to answer the question, 'Why do I feel so far from God?' When you understand your attachment style, you gain a whole new paradigm for a secure and loving relationship with God.

You'll gain insights about how you relate to others, both your strengths and weaknesses, the practical exercises you can use to grow a secure spiritual attachment to God, how to move forward on the spirituality spectrum and experience the divine connection we were all created for. You will learn to identify and remove mixed messages about closeness with God that you may have heard in church or from well-meaning Christians. With freedom from the past, you can then chart a new path toward intimate connection with the God of the Universe."

And then I'm going to give you one last book. I haven't read it yet, but it's on my bookstand, ready to take me on my next adventure. And it's called *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* by Diana Butler Bass. And I'm not going to read anything about it because I don't know anything about it yet, but I am going to be diving into that and who knows—maybe it'll be amazing and I'll take the Flying Higher women through it. But again, like I said, links to all of these books will be in the show notes. Beautiful butterflies, I wish you the very best on your adventures, explorations, and journeys into the mysteries of God and the universe we live in.