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Embracing Forgiveness Despite His Choices

Day 1 of 3

Guest: Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen

From the series: The Healing Choice

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Bob: When Fred Stoker proposed to his girlfriend, Brenda, she faced a dilemma. She knew about his promiscuous past and about his involvement with pornography.

Brenda: The things that he had been involved in before we met, I just thought, "Man, this is rotten. This kind of stuff is really icky." Then he became a Christian a year before we met. I was young, I was naïve, to some extent, but I just thought, "Well, okay, he's a new person in Christ. These things aren't a part of his life," and that was how I accepted it.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Wednesday, April 1st. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll talk today about how a wife can learn to forgive and can embrace trust after her husband has been involved with various kinds of sexual sin. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. On a number of occasions, when I've been speaking at one of our FamilyLife Weekend to Remember Marriage Conferences, one of the subjects that we address briefly in the conference is the issue of pornography, because if a couple is going to have a healthy sexual relationship in marriage, you have to address the problem, or the potential problem, that pornography can be for that.

Dennis: Right.

Bob: And in those situations, I have said, with some fear and trembling even in saying this, but I have said to guys, if this is an area where you have been ensnared, and you really want to get free, at some point you're going to have to come clean with your wife. And in saying that, I know that what I'm setting up just by saying that is an explosion that's about to happen in some marriages when a husband says, "You know, I have to tell you what's been going on," and, all of a sudden, a wife is going to be a place she never thought she was going to find herself.

Dennis: And the betrayal is – well, it's equivalent to that of an affair. It may be a fantasy, it may work its way from a fantasy to a reality of a real affair, but wives

will feel betrayed at the very core of their marriage because marriage is, ultimately, a promise of fidelity.

Bob: Well, and Jesus said, "Any man who looks on a woman to lust" and right there is a good definition of what's going on with pornography, right?

Dennis: Right.

Bob: If you look on a woman to lust, you've committed adultery in your heart. So I think you're right, there is a betrayal that's taken place.

Dennis: And we ran across a great resource for our listeners. The book is called "The Healing Choice." It's by Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen, and both Brenda and Susan join us on FamilyLife Today. Ladies, welcome to the broadcast.

Brenda: Thank you.

Susan: Thank you.

Brenda: Good to be here.

Dennis: Brenda is a registered nurse. She is a mom of four and been married for 27 years. Susan is the mom of one, she's a counselor, and she's been married for 26 years, and both of these wives and moms have something in common – their husbands struggled with pornography, and they have formed a substantial collaborative force to write this book. I want to read an e-mail that you begin this book with, because I think there are, likely, women who are listening to us today who could write this e-mail as well.

"I am desperate for a pinpoint of hope right now. Though I am just married, my husband's porn and lust are killing our marriage. I have been so completely deceived and lied to that I have become someone else; someone I don't want to be. I have never been so hurt, wounded, frustrated, and hopeless. My husband is a believer and knows all the right words to say about this issue, but the sin continues daily if not hourly, and he continues to lie about it and to deceive himself by saying he isn't as bad as the next guy. We have been to counseling, but that only worked for a day. I can no longer handle this issue on my own. I am desperate for someone to show my husband the depth and weight of his sin. I need encouragement and counseling myself. This is a nightmare compared to my Christian dreams of marriage. I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I said, 'I do.'"

Now, Brenda, that's your story as well, right?

Brenda: Yes, yes.

Dennis: How long had you been married before you found out your husband, Fred, was into pornography?

Brenda: I think probably about three or four years maybe. Fred had a background – a non-Christian background, and he was introduced to pornography at a very young age, and he became a Christian a year before we met, and I, coming from a Christian background, just assumed that, you know, well, that wouldn't be any part of his life. No Christian guy has problems like that. It never occurred to me that he would be into anything of that sort.

And, Fred, after we were married, never spent money on pornography, but he would look at things like magazine inserts – he was trying to be faithful to me in his way. He didn't want to spend our money on going out and buying porn, but his eyes would still be looking at the girl that went by in skimpy clothes or whatever. So he had a problem, perhaps not as extreme as many that we would hear about today but still one that was costing us quite a bit in our marriage.

When I found out about it, my circumstances were somewhat different than many women, because he had already been really dealt with by the Lord and was working hard at getting over that problem and was pretty much, I think, to the end of his battle with it. So I found out in hindsight, maybe you could say that it had been a problem for us.

Bob: You knew, before you married Fred, about his past and about this struggle he'd had before coming to Christ, didn't you?

Brenda: No, no, he didn't say anything about that. I knew that he had not been raised in a Christian home, and I knew he had had a lot of girlfriends, but I had no idea of the pornography issues that he had before we were married.

Bob: So it was three to four years in when that whole story came to light?

Brenda: Right, but when he told me about it, it was already over, and, honestly, again, I was from a Christian background, pretty naïve, and at that time I guess I remember being just kind of relieved that he wasn't buying "Playboy" magazines. He hadn't been doing really bad – in my opinion – really bad things like that. So I didn't even quite realize the depth of what had done on there. It was more as we talked about it, worked through it, that I realized, "Oh, my goodness, there's been a whole lot more going on here than what I thought."

Bob: But when you found out the detail of his premarriage, pre-Christian background, wasn't there something in you going "Didn't you feel like you should tell me this before we got married? Didn't you feel like this was part of the story I needed to know?"

Brenda: No, I didn't. You know, you would be surprised, but I didn't really think of that because Fred and – I knew he was a committed Christian in every way. He was a wonderful husband to me. He was a great dad to our son, and so in his case, there was a lot of positive stuff that was off-weighing this other area.

And perhaps I wasn't quite as surprised because I knew that there had been a lot of it in his family tree, and so knowing that he had dealt with some of that, it wasn't a tremendous surprise and, again, I was relieved because the problem was pretty much over by then.

Bob: Dennis, we've had Brenda's husband, Fred, as a guest on FamilyLife Today. He's written a book called "Every Man's Battle," and we had the chance to hear his story a number of years ago, and if our listeners are interested, we have transcripts of those programs available on our website, and, in fact, you can listen to the audio of those programs on FamilyLifeToday.com as well.

Dennis: And Fred's problem started when he was a young teenager, right?

Brenda: Very young. He was about 11 when he was exposed to pornography. Again, and I don't want to sound like I'm repetitive, but I was so naïve, and I tend to think a lot of us women are very naïve. We don't understand the differences between men and women sexually. I've learned tons since Fred has had his problems, and we've learned a lot since then.

Dennis: Susan, you're a counselor. You've, undoubtedly, dealt with a number of women who have had this kind of disclosure. Is Brenda's encounter here the norm or is how she responded kind of outside the norm? I mean, I'm thinking there are a lot of women who are listening right now who can't understand how you, Brenda, took that as easily as you did.

Susan: Yeah, I would say that Brenda's response is outside the norm. I've seen other women that have somehow been able to sort of rise above the feelings of betrayal and be on board with where their husbands are at. But usually it has been when the husband is so submitted and repentant at that point. I've never seen a woman without that position where her husband is coming in from that paradigm.

Dennis: In other words, it makes it easier for a wife to have more of a gracious response if the husband has really done business with God and has dealt with his sin.

Susan: Yes.

Dennis: Without having to be confronted by his wife or maybe even another man.

Susan: Yes, and yet that's not the whole package. There are certainly women that are devastated with that kind of news even when the husband is very sorrowful about what he's done.

Bob: Well, and, of course, as soon as we say that, I'm thinking of a husband who is listening and is saying, "Well, okay, so I need to wait until I've dealt with this before I go to my wife to make it easier for her to hear it, but that guy may never get to his wife. He may need her to be an ally in the battle, mightn't he?"

Susan: Yeah, I really think that – certainly, timing is part of the equation about when a husband does come to talk to his wife. That's something for him to really work through between prayer and talking with other men that have been down this road to determine when that time is, and to get some good counsel and godly wisdom to make that determination about what to tell and how much to tell.

Bob: And, you know, most guys are thinking, "I don't want to tell any, and I don't want to say it at all." I mean, it's a scary prospect for a husband to sit down with his wife and say, "I'm coming clean on this kind of a situation." Do you think when I tell guys at a Weekend to Remember Marriage Conference – "You've got to bring your wife in on this, or you're not going to get where you need to go?" Am I giving them the right counsel?

Susan: Yes, you are. What typically happens, though, is a man will put out what I call a "tester confession." He'll see how she responds and then give her more later.

Dennis: So if she reacts strongly, he may retreat and may never come clean.

Susan: Possibly.

Bob: Give me an example of a tester confession. What would a guy say?

Susan: "I only did it two times," or, you know, "I looked at this stuff, but I didn't do this much," you know, usually there's an "only," there's a limitation to what he did or who he was with or wasn't with.

Dennis: Brenda, in Fred's case, was there a tester confession?

Brenda: No, there wasn't. In fact, it's kind of a funny story with Fred. This is a little embarrassing, but it's in one of his books, so I might as well tell it. He had been noticing me physically a lot more than normal. I'd walk past him, and there would be a little pat on the shoulder or a pat on the backside, and all these things, and I just kind of "What is the matter with him? What is wrong with him" – because it went on for a number of days.

(laughter)

Bob: What's the matter with him? He thought you're cute, that's what's the matter with him.

Brenda: He sure did, he sure did. I mean, the way it came up was that I finally said, "What in the world am I doing to make you be doing this? I need to stop." It doesn't sound very nice, but – so then he – there was no tester, like what Susan's talking about. I kind of brought it up. "So your behavior is different. What's been going on here?" And then he said, "I need to tell you something," and he said, "This is something that I've struggled with for years and years, and since we've been married, I've never purchased anything, but if I travel, I see movies that aren't right, I" – you know, there were these other things. And he said, "I want you to know I've been working on it, I'm nearly out of it, but because now my eyes are looking only at you, you're really looking good."

Dennis: Now, we're laughing about this, Brenda, but as he began to unpack all that he'd been off into, and I don't remember all the details, Bob, of Fred's confession in his book, "Every Man's Battle," but he laid it out where he was off into some pretty heavy stuff for a number of years as a teenager and a young single man in adulthood before he married you.

Brenda: Right.

Dennis: And as that was confessed, I'm back to Bob's statement – wasn't there some sense of feeling like – "I'm feeling betrayed here?" Because I can't imagine a wife hearing this for the first time who wouldn't feel some form of betrayal at some level.

Bob: Let me give you just an example – when Fred said to you, "There was one point, Brenda, where I was engaged to two women at the same time and was also being intimated with a third woman at that time," did you go, "Oh, well, I'm glad you're not doing that now?"

Brenda: Well, my thoughts were – the things that he had been involved in before we met, I just thought, "Man, this is rotten. This kind of stuff is really icky." And yet, in my mind, then he became a Christian a year before we met, and all things become new, and I saw, in his lifestyle, a Christian lifestyle. So I knew there had been tremendous change in him. And so, again, I was young, I was naïve, to some extent, but I just thought, "Well, okay, he's a new person in Christ. These things aren't a part of his life," and that was how I accepted it.

Dennis: So after you heard that, at any point did you get angry? I mean, I'm understanding your response at this point, Brenda. I mean, you're looking back, and you're going, "Before Christ, after Christ" – I married the new man, but, yeah, the old man kind of drug some luggage into our marriage here, and now we're unpacking this, and it's pretty rotten.

Brenda: Right. I don't recall being angry at him, but there were certainly effects of that, because I do remember very often then, all of a sudden, I am under the bondage of feeling compared, like, "Oh, my goodness, what about all" ...

Dennis: Exactly, that's why ...

Brenda: ... "what about all the" – yeah, I did deal with that, and, you know, that is something that never goes away. I don't think about it very rarely now because we've had 27 wonderful, good years together, but, yeah, those other things, they did come in. You wonder, on a bad time, does he wish maybe he had stuck with the other girlfriend or did they look a little nicer than I do or – there's a lot of stuff there that you can ...

Dennis: Or some of the images.

Brenda: Yes.

Dennis: Is he thinking of some of the images – you know, does he not like me?

Brenda: Yeah, you can certainly wonder stuff like that, because, you know, when you've seen things, those images are in your head for your whole life, and you kind of wonder, boy, when are these popping – are they popping up or are they not? And I think one of the hardest things for wives is re-establishing trust with their husbands.

Dennis: That's exactly where I was going – on his next trip.

Brenda: Right.

Dennis: Did you ask him about watching movies or if he was allowing his eyes to wander in any way?

Brenda: In my case with Fred, again, he – we already had had – he was a trustworthy – he seemed to me, anyway, a trustworthy Christian man, and I gave him a lot of benefit of the doubt on this kind of stuff. Had I found him in it, had he not come to me and said, "I've dealt with this. It's a problem in the past, so I've dealt with it, I'm over it, and I could tell he was by the way he was looking at me all the time. So I knew, "There's some truth here. I'm the only one he's looking at, I think," so there were already – in my case – trustworthy responses from him to allow me to build trust with him better. Had I caught him at it, it would have been a different story.

Dennis: Oh, no doubt.

Brenda: Yes.

Dennis: Was there a point in time where you knew you forgave him for the deceit, for the lust, for the wandering eyes – was there a time when you said, "Fred, I want you to know, I forgive you for all of that?"

Brenda: Did I say it to him personally, you mean?

Dennis: Yes.

Brenda: Did I come to him and say "I forgive you?" No. It's funny you mention that, because I never did – I mean, that's not a conversation I had with him. In my own mind, I did forgive him, because I – again, I didn't know that much about those kinds of things, but I figured, well, you know – as I said before, he's a Christian. I know he's different, and I know he has struggled, and I trust that he's being honest with me.

You know, but, again, there, it's real tricky, because if he had told me that, and I'd given him the benefit of the doubt and then later found him in something else, we would have had a whole different ballgame to deal with.

Dennis: Right, and the thought has occurred to me and, Brenda, I'm going to give you 100 percent freedom to say no to me if you don't want to do this. But I want Bob to tell our listeners how they can get a copy of both yours and Susan's book here, "The Healing" ...

Bob: She's not going to say no to that part.

Dennis: No, she's not going to say no to ...

Brenda: He's going to get to the real thing.

Dennis: "The Healing Choice," but because you said you have already forgiven Fred in your own mind, but you have not said it to him verbally, I think there may be some men who may need to hear a wife forgive her husband and hear those words. And so Fred is out there, we'll invite him in here, if you would like to allow us to listen to those words.

Brenda: I'll do it.

Bob: Okay, while he is making his way into the studio, let me quickly let our listeners know that we do have copies of your book, "The Healing Choice" in our FamilyLife Resource Center, along with the book you and Fred have written called "Every Heart Restored," that is written for couples to go through together once the reality of sexual sin has been realized in a marriage relationship.

Go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com, and the information you need about these books is available there, and you can order them from us online, if you'd like. Again, it's FamilyLifeToday.com or call 1-800-FLTODAY – 1-800-358-6329, that's 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY, and we'll make arrangements to get whatever resources you need sent to you.

I also want to let you know that if you are able to help FamilyLife Today with a donation this month of any amount, we have a special way that we'd like to say thank you. First, you need to know that FamilyLife Today is listener-supported, and the reason we are able to be on this station at this time is because folks like you have either gone online at FamilyLifeToday.com or have called 1-800-FLTODAY to make a donation to help support the ministry, and if you are able to do that this month, what we'd like to send you is a DVD called "Magdalena." It's the story of a number of the women who came in contact with Jesus during his life – women whose lives were transformed and who were released from the shame of their past. Interesting, as we consider the theme we've been talking about today.

If you'd like to receive a copy of this DVD when you make a donation, all you have to do is write "Magdalena" in the keycode box on the donation form online. So go to FamilyLifeToday.com, and as you fill out the donation form just type in the word "Magdalena," m-a-g-d-a-l-e-n-a, or call 1-800-FLTODAY. You can make your donation over the telephone and just request a copy of the DVD. I want to say thank you to those of you who are able to help with a donation. Your financial support means so much to us, and we do appreciate your partnership with us.

And, at this point, we want to welcome Fred Stoker into the studio with us. Fred has been a guest with us before on FamilyLife Today. He has been out in the other part of the studio and has joined us here now. Fred, welcome to FamilyLife Today.

Fred: It's great to see you.

Dennis: Usually, Fred, we are interviewing you at this point. We're not asking you to say much of anything.

Bob: And let me just set a context here, if I can, and, Fred, correct me if I'm wrong on any of this, but at an early age you were exposed to pornography. If I remember right, your dad was into pornography, and that's where the exposure took place.

Fred: Yes.

Bob: When you were a young teenager, he wanted to set you up with a prostitute.

Fred: Yes.

Bob: You told us when you were here before that you knew the dates that your favorite magazines came out, and you were at the newsstand buying them right and left when you were a young man.

Fred: Yes, skipped class to do it.

Bob: You got involved in a number of premarital sexual encounters with women and, as I said earlier, there was a point in your life where you were engaged to two women, and carrying on with others simultaneously.

Fred: Yes.

Dennis: And wrote about this in his book, "Every Man's Battle," to really bring hope and healing to men. And now this has come full circle with Brenda and Susan writing a book to bring the hope and healing to women who have been betrayed.

Brenda, I'm going to turn it over to you to look in Fred's eyes, and you guys are holding hands, so ...

Brenda: Fred, now let me not cry in front of everybody – I know that I've forgiven you in my heart, but it never occurred to me to do that face-to-face, and so I want you to know that I completely forgive you for everything from early in our marriage and the struggles that you had, and more than that, I admire you for what you have done in all the years since. You have been so faithful to me, and I know that it's a daily thing that is – your purity towards me, towards the Lord, is something that is one of the biggest priorities to you, and you have been able to pass that down to our kids now. And you've provided a home for me where I don't worry about where your eyes are at or where your thoughts are at anymore, and I am blessed beyond blessed for the fight that you've gone through, and I appreciate it.

Dennis: I appreciate you, Brenda, sharing that. I want to pray for the man who just heard that and who is thinking what he needs to do next.

Heavenly Father, I thank you for Brenda allowing us to peer into the power of forgiveness and the release and the freedom from sin that comes as a result of knowing that's a reality in a marriage of two imperfect people who disappoint each other, but who can express what You did for us on the cross when You took away all our sin.

And, Father, I want to pray for a man who is listening who may be ensnared, enslaved, who needs to come clean and get out of the prison, and may somehow

these words that have been expressed today bring the courage to be able to do that. In Christ's name I pray, amen.

Bob: FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas – help for today; hope for tomorrow.

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