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Moving Beyond Betrayal

Day 3 of 3

Guest: Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen

From the series: The Healing Choice

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Bob: When Susan Allen found out that he husband, Clay, had been unfaithful, she faced two very important decisions – would she decide to forgive him, which, ultimately she did. But, second, would she decide to trust him again? That decision took a little more time.

Susan: It was a process of degrees of trust. There was probably a solid year, at least, of every move he made he was accountable to all the details to me, and then it was a matter of him being accountable to other guys that he would travel with. And there are still things that, to this day, that he checks in with me on – on comings and goings with work.

Yeah, it was a long road, and he did whatever it took.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, April 3rd. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll talk today about how a spouse can rebuild trust by living consistently over a long period of time.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. If you had a woman who came to you, and she said, "Here is my situation, Dennis – I was married to my first husband, and in the midst of that I started seeing another man, and we eventually had an affair. I left my first husband; I married the man I was having the affair with. Then I began to see problems in his behavior. I was suspicious and confronted him, and he confessed to the fact that he had been with a prostitute. There were other things that were coming to light that led me to believe that he was involved in all kinds of extramarital sexual sin including pornography and self-gratification, things like that.

If a wife had just become aware that all of this was now out in the open, and she came to you and said, "What do I do?" How would you coach her?

Dennis: Well, you know, you didn't get there overnight, and so there's not going to be a quick fix in a situation like this, and one of the things you're going to need is a great resource to guide you through a situation like this. And we have a couple of ladies with us – in fact, one who went through a situation exactly like you're describing, Bob.

The book is called "The Healing Choice," and it's written by Brenda Stoker and Susan Allen. Brenda, Susan, welcome back to FamilyLife Today.

Susan: Thank you for having us.

Brenda: Thank you.

Dennis: Brenda is a registered nurse. She's an author, a speaker, and mom of four. Susan is a counselor and married to her husband, Clay, and has one daughter and together they wrote this book and, Susan, what Bob was describing was your marriage.

Susan: Indeed, unfortunately.

Dennis: There was a moment when your husband, Clay, finally opened the box and let you in. He shared all of what was taking place that he had been hiding for over seven years, living a secret life. Take us to that place when he confessed all this, and what did he say, and then I want to know, importantly, how did you respond?

Bob: And did he confess it on his own? Or were you in the process of confronting him when he finally came clean?

Susan: I guess we'll call it "the last confession."

Dennis: The last confession?

Susan: The last confession.

Dennis: You mean he tried other confessions that didn't work?

Susan: There were others that were partial. There was a big confession, but it wasn't complete, and we were talking about starting a family, and I said, "I'm emotionally ready for that." He was ready. But I said, "I can't go forward until I know what's going on." And so he gave me a confession that was 90-percent complete, but he left out a detail that, for him, he thought was a deal-breaker. I guess he thought that it would be the end of marriage for me. But it was something in his head that was a line that he had crossed. It was an affair with someone that we both knew as opposed to a prostitute, with someone that I didn't.

And he didn't tell me about it even though I gave him several opportunities to tell all. But we moved forward from that after a little bit of counseling, and we both were newly dedicated our lives to the Lord in that last couple of years there. We were moving in a different direction than what our marriage had been.

That time when he made that confession, it wasn't as painful as the next confession because it actually made me feel like I wasn't crazy for the first time. He was telling me everything that I thought was going on.

Bob: That you kind of already knew.

Susan: Yeah, yeah, so, certainly, there was a certain amount of anger, but we were both in a new place and ready to find ways to do things in a new way.

Dennis: Were you saying that the second confession did make you angry and was far more startling and surprising?

Susan: Oh, yeah. As I told you, that first confession was in the context of starting a family, so we moved forward with that plan in mind. And got pregnant very quickly and, thankfully, nine months, or a year later, we had our daughter. And when she became six months old, there were circumstances that I found something was amiss, and I confronted Clay. At first, he waffled and didn't acknowledge anything.

Dennis: So he lied to you.

Susan: Mm-hm, but God was pressing in on him, and he went and sat down with some of his friends and told them everything and was trying to brace himself to tell me everything. And he told me everything the next day, and it was like somebody just pulling the earth out from under my feet, because I swore I would never bring a child into a marriage with this kind of problem. I saw it in my parents' marriage – I could throw my life away on a marriage, but I just didn't want to do that to a child.

Bob: So from his first confession, the 90-percent confession, until this second bombshell, there continued to be patterns hidden away? He continued to have unfaithfulness? Was he continuing to look at pornography and continued to be involved in sexual sin?

Well, what happened, very specifically, was that he didn't confess a one-time – an affair. And the behavior that tripped him up was that very thing. It was as though Satan had a hook in him, and that was the very thing, and he had a series of these kinds of one-time encounters.

There was a period of time after that other confession that he didn't, but you can only try so hard when you're not fighting Satan on – with the proper tools.

Dennis: And so he caved in and had another affair?

Susan: He did.

Dennis: You were pregnant at the time?

Susan: I probably was. I don't really remember all the details, but there were a handful between the time of that and the time up until she was six months old.

Dennis: Wow, I mean, Susan, you had to feel absolutely trapped because the context of this discussion was around starting a family. You felt like he'd come clean, and now you've got a baby, the result of trust, which is really the core issue of what we're talking about here.

Susan: Yes.

Dennis: When a man steps away from his vows and becomes unfaithful, whether it's to pornography or to a prostitute or a one-night stand or to an ongoing affair, nonetheless, the vows are breached. The trust can be broken.

Susan: Yes.

Bob: So, as best you can, take us to that place – was it in your home when he said, "I need to have a conversation with you?" I mean, describe the scene and tell us what you were feeling and, as best you can remember, tell us what he said.

Susan: I don't remember his exact words. I remember the overall – what he confessed to me. What I remember was what I felt. I felt numb, I felt nauseous, I felt my head was spinning, I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. It was as though my world had just imploded. It wasn't the first time I've had this feeling, but it was the most major impact I've ever experienced – that kind of just gut-wrenching. I believe I probably said, "How could you?" I'm not a really big screamer. I can get my voice up, but I don't scream. I didn't hit him – I'm a little too, I guess, intellectual for that.

Dennis: But just watching you process this, relive it, as you're telling us here, the pain was unspeakable.

Susan: Oh, yeah.

Dennis: And I think that's what a man needs to hear who is listening today – that when we betray our wives, and we may already know this – it really is a breach of the most intimate trust a man and a woman make on this planet. It's the bonds of marriage.

Susan: Absolutely.

Dennis: And that's what you felt like was being ripped in two at that point.

Susan: Yeah.

Bob: Were you thinking to yourself, "I'm outta here?"

Susan: Yes.

Bob: Take the baby and leave?

Susan: Yeah, I'll take the baby, and you're never going to see her again. Yeah, I did have those kinds of thoughts.

Bob: Did you say that to him?

Susan: No.

Dennis: So what did you do?

Susan: I told him to leave. I figured – I was a different person than I was before, and I really didn't fear – here I was with a baby, but the difference was I wasn't afraid to be alone now, and I needed time. I was going to give myself the gift of time to process, to decide what to do. And even though my emotions were just raging, I was going to really work through it and not allow Clay's worry about what's going to happen with his marriage concern me with what I needed to do. And I really didn't know what I was going to do. I mean, I couldn't trust him past the doorway – what he was going to do outside of my sight.

But the biggest thing that happened for me, and the change in walking with God was deciding to do things God's way and not my way, you know, if you read through my book, you saw how many really bad decisions I made using my wisdom – not good.

Bob: So there was a thought in your head that "I know how I'm feeling, but I've got to ask a different question than I would have asked before. I've got to ask what would God have me to here," right?

Susan: Yeah, yeah.

Dennis: That was really a new question for you.

Susan: It was, it was.

Dennis: I want to read a passage, because this is really where you were at this moment, and we don't talk about this verse enough in the Christian community today – Romans 12, 1& 2 – "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice – holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be

transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God – that which is good, acceptable and perfect.

As I listened to your story, Susan, what was different in your life was you were living this out. You had given your life to Christ, and you were attempting to listen to what is God's will for me? Not what does the world want me to do? The world would say, "Throw the towel in. Divorce him, get everything you can get out of it, take your daughter and find a safe place." But the Scriptures don't call us to put our brains and park them off to the side and just do something mindlessly, but they do call us to tough love, and that's what you did.

Susan: Yeah, it was pretty tough.

Dennis: How do you rebuild trust?

Susan: With a long measuring stick. It wasn't a day ...

Dennis: Called t-i-m-e – lots of time.

Susan: Mm-hm, it wasn't a year.

Bob: I've talked to husbands in the other side of this situation, but the husband who has been an offender, and we need to say, I think, at some point, that sexual sin can happen on either side of a marriage. A wife can be the one who has been involved in repeated affairs or even in romantic fantasies. This isn't always a husband/wife situation, although, typically, in this culture, pornography is a male-dominated issue, and wives are the ones who are experiencing what Susan experienced.

But I've talked to men who say, "How long before my wife is going to trust me again?" And I have said, "Here is the formula – consistent behavior over time – CB/T is your formula. You have to demonstrate consistent behavior, over time. And they say, "How long is the time," and I say "As long as it takes." Because most of the time I'll say, "Well, how long was the pattern of sin?"

Dennis: Yeah.

Bob: And I say, "It's going to be at least that long, maybe. It could be that long, it could be longer than that, but you've got to understand, this is a significant breach."

Dennis: I've actually had guys who have had patterns of this over a 10-year period – want to flip the switch, and part of it's the way we're wired, as men. We want to fix things. We want to flip a switch so we can move on. We want – "Okay, forgive me so we can be okay. Tell me we're okay."

But a 10-year mess can't be cleaned up overnight, and it can't be cleaned up, as you've just said, in a year. And in your situation, how long would you say it took you before you regained trust, and I'm assuming that today you trust Clay.

Susan: I do. It was a process of degrees of trust. There was probably a solid year, at least, of every move he made he was accountable to all the details to me. And then it was a matter of him being accountable to other guys that he would travel with. And there are still things to this day that he checks in with me on – on comings and goings with work. He is self-employed. It was a long road – a good, solid two years, before I could really feel fairly comfortable that he really was a changed person.

Bob: And that's what you were looking for. You were looking for – are these old patterns going to re-emerge? Because a guy can clean up his act for a month or two or three, but for a wife to feel like real change has taken place, like I said, it's got to be consistent behavior for a long period of time.

I want to ask both of you, because we've got women who are listening, who are either about to hear a confession from their husband. They don't know it, but it's about to come, and it's going to rock their world the way it rocked your world. Or maybe they've just heard it, and the world has been rocked, and they said, "Get out," and they're trying to figure out what the next step is.

Or maybe they're in the rebuild process, but their soul is still aching over the news of what's going on. If you were on the phone with that woman today, and she said, "I just need some coaching here," how do I get from where I am today? Is there really light at the end of this tunnel? What do I need to do – not what does my husband need to do, but what do I need to do? How would you coach her?

Brenda: Well, I think Susan and I probably have a couple of different ideas on this one, but one that I have found extremely important over all the years since Fred and I have dealt with this, learned about it, written about it, is that women typically – we have no clue about the differences between men and women sexually – what causes a man to get into this; how it can be addictive, why does he keep going back to it; why is she not enough for him?

And so one of the most important things to me is that she really educate herself on that. Fred and I had written a book a couple of years ago called "Every Heart Restored," and the main thing in that was to just lay out the differences so she can see. And when you can defuse the feeling of "It was all my fault," and the anger at him by understanding this is what's behind the behavior.

Bob: You're not excusing the behavior.

Brenda: No, you're not excusing, you're just understanding – these are some of the differences. This is what causes it because we are totally different – men and women. So, first of all, read and understand – learn about what men are like. Learn the differences, and then, equally important would be developing a deeper, closer walk with the Lord yourself, because you're sure going to need it. And then I know Susan would have great stuff of accountability and help in groups.

Susan: What every woman needs beyond connectedness with God is connectedness with other women that she can talk to that understand what she's going through and an understanding of what it is she's going through, which is, of course, a good resource like the book that we're talking about today. But I can't over-emphasize the need to have other women.

Bob: Did you open up? Did you have a friend or somebody you went to and somebody who walked the path with you?

Susan: God had put those people in our life, setting it up before that day came, and it was instrumental, and we used that as a model for what every woman and man needs because of how much help it gave for us in walking through our situation. And not everyone has that ready built into their lives – those people – in that network of people. And so we've helped to create those kinds of small, intimate settings of men and women.

Dennis: And I want to just comment, Susan, on something you said there. If I could just speak to the woman who may find herself in a unique spot of having a wife come to her and confide something like this – you need to be safe. You need to be a safe place for someone to come and dump their sorrow almost like toxic waste and not pick up stones to condemn the husband or to shame her.

The Christian community ought to be the safest place on the planet.

Susan: Absolutely.

Dennis: The church – what is it but a bunch of sinners. We've all failed. Okay, this is an area of failure, and I'm not minimizing the failure here, but we really need to check our view of grace. We are all in need of forgiveness and all in need of grace and, you know, I just appreciate both of you coming on our broadcast and sharing your story with us. Your book outlines how a woman can respond in the midst of the trauma of this, and I just want to encourage women to grow personally through this, spiritually in your relationship with God – to pray, to get in the Word, and to get your marching orders from God not the world, because the world is going to send you a different message. You need to get in with some other people who do know you, as you said, and some other couples where healing can occur, and that can be expressed to your husband.

I know that Clay developed a relationship, Brenda, with your husband, Fred, and that's really how this book came about, in part, and that accountability really helps you trust him today because of that relationship.

And then, ultimately, I want to encourage the person who is listening right now who may find themselves in this situation – to forgive. Ultimately, forgiveness is not optional in the Christian community. It is the fabric of what a Christ-follower does, and that doesn't mean you do that overnight. It doesn't mean you do it flippantly, but as earlier Brenda demonstrated, it does begin in the heart, and then it makes its way out into words. And, ladies, thanks for sharing your story.

Susan: Thank you, thanks for having us.

Brenda: Thanks for having us, it's been a pleasure.

Bob: You know, as you were talking, Dennis, I was thinking of 1 Corinthians 6 where the Bible says, "Don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Don't be deceived, neither the sexually immoral or idolators or adulterers," and it goes on, "men who practice homosexuality, thieves, the greedy, the drunkards, the revilers" ...

Dennis: And I know the phrase you are about to read.

Bob: Verse 11 – "And such were some of you, but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God," and that message of grace that you were talking about. We have to remember, yeah, there is a standard of holiness that the Bible calls us to, and we've all fallen from it.

Now, our question is are we going to help men and women get point back in the right direction?

Dennis: And are we going to come alongside marriages that are struggling because of an issue like this and cheer them on to stick together and to finish the course together. That's the great need within the Christian community.

Bob: That's right. We need to be full of grace and truth as we intersect with others, and it helps to have resources like what Brenda and Susan have written, the book "The Healing Choice," to provide coaching for how you get from where you are to where God wants you to be.

And let me encourage our listeners to go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com, and there is information available there about this book. Again, it's FamilyLifeToday.com. You can go online to order a copy of Brenda and Susan's book, "The Healing Choice," or call 1-800-FLTODAY, 1-800-358-6329, 1-800-F-

as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY, and we'll let you know how you can get a copy of this book sent to you.

You know, this Sunday is Palm Sunday, and it begins the commemoration of the last week of the life of Jesus, a particularly powerful time for us to draw our attention toward the reality of the Gospel, the reality of the Resurrection, and how Jesus brings forgiveness, transformation, and hope through the Gospel.

That's the message of a DVD that we have come across that is called "Magdalena, Released from Shame." It tells the story of a number of women whose lives were touched by the Master during Jesus's life on earth, and this powerful DVD is a gift we're making available to you this month when you help support the ministry of FamilyLife Today with a donation of any amount. We'd love to send this out to you.

All you have to do is go online at FamilyLifeToday.com and fill out the donation form, and when you come to the keycode box on the 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 by telephone and ask for a copy of the DVD and, again, it's our gift to you when you do help support the ministry of FamilyLife Today this month. We are listener-supported, and so your donations are critical for the ongoing work of this ministry, and we so much appreciate those of you who get in touch with us and help support what God is doing through FamilyLife Today. Thanks for your partnership with us.

And we hope you have a great weekend. I hope you and your family are able to worship together this weekend, and I hope you can join us back on Monday when we're going to talk with author and speaker Mary DeMuth about what it means to be a first-generation Christian and how you can have the Christian family you didn't have when you were growing up.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back here Monday for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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