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Revealing Beauty from Ashes

Guest: Dr. Sheri Keffer
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Bob: Sheri Keffer and her husband Conner were trying to get help for their marriage after he had confessed to infidelity and pornography. Sheri thought they were making progress until Conner called and confessed that, once again, he had been unfaithful to his wife.

Sheri: I remember, at that point, saying, "Conner, I am so mad because you are taking everything away from me including your family. I don't know what more to do with you." From that point on, I took a year; and I met with pastors. I read everything I could. I prayed, and I really sought God. Yes; I had biblical grounds; but I needed to know, "Are You telling me, God, to take this next step—to break a covenant that meant everything to me?"

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. We'll hear from Sheri Keffer today about her journey through unfaithfulness and deception. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. Anybody who has listened to this program for any length of time, undoubtedly, understands that we are big here at FamilyLife on the sacred nature of the marriage covenant / that the marriage covenant is something that we should take very seriously, and we should protect and preserve at virtually all costs.

I say virtually all costs because there are times when that covenant gets violated in significant and severe ways; and there are times when husbands or wives make a decision that they wish that they didn't have to make; but in many cases, they are facing no real alternative.

I say all of that because what we're talking about this week—sometimes—leads to that point where a husband or a wife has to make a difficult decision and say "I don't think we can preserve this marriage," or "The covenant has been violated already at such a level that I don't think it can be restored."

Dave: And one of the reasons we take the covenant so important is because God does. I know when I do a wedding as a pastor, I always stop at that vow moment just to remind, not only the couple, but everyone sitting there—"This is serious."

Ann: It's sacred.

Dave: We are making a lifetime vow / covenant promise with God vertically, with one another horizontally. Everyone sitting there is going to be a part of this vow which one part of that vow is sexual purity unto you only: “Will I be faithful to God and to my spouse?”

Bob: Forsaking all others.

Dave: Yes.

Ann: Yes.

Sheri: Yes.

Bob: We’ve got somebody who is joining us who believes as we do on this; but whose life experience brought her to the point where divorce became the option she had to face. Sheri Keffer is with us again today. Sheri, thank you for being here.

Sheri: Sure; appreciate it.

Bob: And I know this is a tough way to even get into the conversation today; but I just wanted our listeners to understand that we can uphold the sacred nature of the marriage covenant; and at the same time, deal with the reality of a fallen world.

There are times when I think the community of faith can come around somebody and say, “This may be the thing that we’ve got to pursue with you and for you.” I know you never dreamed / imagined / hoped / wanted—in fact, you fought for years for your marriage to be preserved; but you were married to somebody who—if there is a definition of a sexual addict, that’s what your husband was.

Sheri: Right.

Bob: He had been serially unfaithful. You had gone through therapy and workshops and treatment programs, and he could not get free from his bondage to sexual sin. It forced you to a point where you had to sit down and go—“Do I persevere and deal with this as my life, or do I do what I never wanted to do and file for divorce?”

Ann: Well, Bob, I want to go a little bit because, Sheri, earlier you had told us that you had to tell somebody. So, how was that response from the body of believers? Where they helpful?

Sheri: You know what? I think finding out about sexual betrayal is somewhat like leprosy. I think—I felt the body of Christ pull away from us rather than shore us up. I’m not saying it’s that way everywhere; but I think that there is a lot of fear.

So, I think—I wish more people would press in at that time because they—as couples, we need the support more than ever at that time. In fact, I wish there was a hospital, of sorts, that would have a gurney there for the betrayed partner and would have honest accountability /

love think tank for the person that's acting out. Really start working on some deep, deep repair—much like an ER room.

Bob: You didn't experience that.

Sheri: No.

Dave: And you just described what the church *should* be.

Ann: *Should* be.

Sheri: I know. I know.

Dave: When you said that, it was like—"What a beautiful picture." That should be the community of faith.

Sheri: I know; but you know what? A Gallup poll said recently more than 50 percent of pastors are struggling with this; right? So, it's not just Conner. So, if the pastor is struggling with it, do you think he's going to be preaching on it? Do you think he's going to be building a hospital? No; they're—it's—

Ann: They are all living in a house of shame—

Sheri: Yes.

Ann: —and guilt.

Sheri: Exactly.

Bob: You mentioned your first husband Conner, and we should just say that's a pseudonym that you use in the book—

Sheri: Right.

Bob: —for him out of a desire to protect his anonymity; and to tell your story—

Sheri: Right.

Bob: —without necessarily violating his story.

Sheri: My heart still aches. Bob, even as you bring up the conversation, I could just feel my heart just dropped. It's like there is still this loss over not having my marriage succeed. I think I will always live with that ache.

Bob: I hope in my bringing it up and addressing it with our audience—I don't bring that up to bring shame to you.

Sheri: I think, Bob, it's really more about—it's about the covenant. It's about the vow. It's about what we hoped we would be. It's about all those years together, and it's about—when you're fighting someone through this and you're giving it everything you had, it's like bonding in a foxhole. You get closer. There was a part of us that did get closer while we were fighting through it; but I just didn't know that he was acting out still; you know? I was deceived about that.

Ann: You still had hope.

Sheri: I still had hope; right. But you are so right about the covenant. Back in the day, in biblical times, it was quite more messy than the ceremonies that you have; right? They had a covenant ceremony where they would take a calf; and they would cut it in two, and then people would walk between those two halves of that calf in order to declare their covenant. In essence, it's like—"May God do to me what is happening to these calves if I don't hold true."

Marriage ceremonies today have the man's family on the one side and the woman's family on the other because it's a ceremonial way of expressing that; but our covenant was broken, and there was no way around it. I found a book that I have had for years. It was Chuck Swindoll who wrote a book called *Strike the Original Match*. In there, he talks about this issue of divorce. What do you do with that?

I remember reading that and dog-earring some of the pages of that because he went in and talked about—"So, what is immorality? If a man divorces his wife—except for immorality—and marries another woman, he commits adultery." So, that word immorality meant a lot to me; and I had no idea that that word is *porneia* in the Greek. Chuck is really clear to say that it's not a one-time—like it's not like I looked at porn, and now all of the sudden, I'm—

Bob: The offended spouse has a get out of jail free card.

Sheri: Exactly.

Bob: Right.

Sheri: It is *porneia* which means of lifestyle of sexual sin. I'm unrepentant. I'm immoral. I'm not turning around. Now, again, if your husband or wife has an affair, then, of course, you have biblical grounds. I don't want to minimize that; but what that word in essence is saying—somebody is not turning. They are not doing what you did, Dave. They are not willing to take a look at it, get into accountability. Unfortunately, that was my story.

So, I waited—when I found out about a prostitute, I was heartbroken. I remember he called me. This time, he did tell me. He called me at work and said, "I just want you to know that I have been with a prostitute." He was crying; and I remember at that point saying, "Conner, I

don't know what more to do with you. I am so mad because you are taking everything away from me—including your family."

From that point on, I took a year, and I took a year and I met with pastors. I read everything I could. I prayed, and I really sought God. Yes; I had biblical grounds; but I needed to know—"Is this a yes? Are you telling me, God, to take this next step to break a covenant that meant everything to me?" So, it was a year later that I made that decision because there was no change.

And I've got to tell you guys this story. So, as we were separating our households, and I was moving out, I was a divorcing, pastor's wife. I didn't have two nickels to rub together at that point. So, I was packing up somethings to go, and I had a bunch of friends helping me. It was raining that day. We were walking around our home, and I noticed when some of the things went out, there were dust bunnies and dirt and mud on the floor that was there from my dogs' footprints in the midst of the rain.

So, I went back to the house because I thought, "I don't want Conner to come home, and it look like this." I don't know why I did that, but I did. I went back, and I thought, "I'm going to just vacuum and then leave"; right? My last time there—and just hug my dog and go.

So, as I was in our kitchen—we had a wooden floor—again, muddy footprints. I took a bucket out of our garage and a cloth and some soap, and I got down on the floor because that's how I mopped my floor—was on my hands and knees. I got down on the floor, and I started cleaning up that dirt on the floor. While I was doing that, I was thinking in my mind, "Conner would never know I'm doing this. Why am I doing this? He's been with so many people. He's looked at porn, and he's been with prostitutes"; and I was there in my anger.

Then, all of the sudden, I can't tell you how God's goodness fell upon my heart at that juncture. When I was just in my anger and rage, I could hear the Lord say, "Beloved, you are washing his feet." I began to weep because God took me back to that time that I washed his feet when I made a covenant to him in marriage, and here I was washing the floor. It's like God knew in my heart of hearts that that's who I was, and that was the only way that I could kind of fulfill that and move forward.

It was a powerful moment of God's goodness, and I just say that was the first day I began to walk toward forgiving or letting go. It's taken me years to complete that journey, but that was the first time I remember saying, "I can let this go and begin to move ahead with my life."

Ann: Gosh, that just makes me cry; but also reminds of God's love for you. It was almost like He was saying, "I've seen, and well, done my daughter. You're my beloved." So, it was almost therapy for you in a way and permission; yes.

Sheri: Permission. And isn't God good in those moments when no one else is around—you know—meets our hearts and helps us move to the next place?

Dave: And He so uses visuals. The water—

Sheri: Yes.

Dave: —the washing the feet—

Ann: Cleansing; yes.

Dave: —the washing the floor. Visually and powerful, and it touched your soul. Yet, let me ask you this because it's so beautiful; and I'm thinking, "Before you had that moment with God"—because I'm looking in your book when there's the chapter you wrote, *Where is God*. It's almost like you had to have this moment before that—and I don't know if that was years or months ahead of time where you're—talk about that—

Ann: Angry.

Dave: —struggle / that darkness where you don't even know if He's there.

Sheri: Yes. I did have a dark journey with God because when you, again, look at trauma and for, there's something I call the dirty dozen which are 12 layers of trauma with all of this. One of them is the spiritual or faith trauma.

So, I went through a very dark time where I had been crying out to God, seriously—"Would You change this? Would You stop him for Your name's sake? For the church's name sake? For the families that know us?" I couldn't have pleaded or yelled any louder in my heart, and I remember coming to a point where I felt like God wasn't hearing me / as if He had turned His back on me.

I remember crying out to God and telling Him, "I don't know need You. I don't really need You anymore." It came out of my mouth. It was audible; you know? No one was around; but I was that hurt and that upset. As soon as I heard it, it's kind of like it ricocheted on the ceiling and came back like a boomerang. I thought, "What did I just say?!" It was in that moment that I realized that I had gotten in backward.

My heart had grown so cold, and I was so hurt because of the unrelenting acting out that I turned my heart from God. Isn't that what the enemy wants; right?

Ann: Yes.

Sheri: To get us to a point where we don't believe God's heart is good, and He's not there for us. I got it backwards. Instead of kicking the dog—you know when you're mad, they talk about kicking the dog—D-O-G. I was kicking G-O-D. I was kicking God because I was so hurt and mad.

That moment helped me begin to turn around and realize how far I'd grown away from the truth of who God is and that He is my ally. He is my Jehovah Ezer. He's my El Roi. He's my Jehovah El Emeth which mean the God of truth. He is all of that. I know that I know that I know that I know who He is now, and I know that He is here to walk it out with every single one of you that are listening.

Bob: Sheri, when you took a year and prayed and thought about what to do and came back at the end of that year said, "I can't continue this relationship," did Conner—did he try to beg / to manipulate, or did he recognize the level of betrayal was such that the marriage could not survive?

Sheri: We were in a parking lot outside of the attorney's office, and Conner said, "Are you sure you want to do this?" I said, "You know what, Conner? You have rendered me helpless in this. This is not what I've wanted; but you have continued to act out, and I am unwilling to live with a revolving door anymore." He looked at me, and he said—he just had nothing to say because he knew that was right. He knew it was true. What a heartbreaking moment—because, you know, it's not what he wanted. It's not what I wanted; but I couldn't continue to live with this revolving door of porn, prostitutes, affairs. It wasn't safe.

Bob: Your work today and your book is for people who have been through what you've been through and who experience the betrayal and recognize—as you said—they are dealing with post-traumatic stress. They have been wounded profoundly. I'm thinking some wives have been wounded on a level one trauma—kind of area. They just found out that their husband was looking at porn on the internet. That's not insignificant; but it's a far cry from where you've been which we'd say is a level five or level six.

Is your book and your work for people who have experienced the deep, profound traumas; or if a wife learns that her husband struggles with porn and has been looking at it occasionally for the last three or four years in their marriage, do they experience the kind of betrayal that they need to go through a process like you've outlined in the book; do you think?

Sheri: That's a great point. So, for us, it's experienced like a tsunami. It changes so many areas of your life—what you thought was safe in your home, now, you worry about your kids / finances now. If you're a stay-at-home mom, now, you are all of the sudden freaking out because you don't know if you could ever have financial independence from this. Your community—you can't talk about it anymore. The spiritual trauma, like I mentioned; the relationship; broken trust—so, I find that many people have multiple layers happen on the front side even in some of their first discoveries.

There wasn't a book out there that addressed how to heal step-by-step in light of what I discovered with the post-traumatic stress symptoms. So, I go into it—body, brain, mind, soul, spirit—and drill it down so deeply because my experiences that I think betrayal happens in a lot of relationships; but I think people heal broken. It's like breaking an arm and then having it heal without it being set well. My book is how to set your arm so you heal well and how to become an advocate so that you can stop what's happening in your home.

Dave: Do you suggest a couple read through it together?

Sheri: I do. You know why? I had a husband and wife in my office a week ago. The guy came in, and he had kind of weepy eyes. He said, “My wife gave me your book.” He said, “I didn’t really know that I had hurt her that bad. I didn’t really think what I had done had been this impactful.” He felt it. Now, do you know how many women want their husbands to have that feel factor?

Dave: Right.

Ann: I think it’s easy, for Dave and I as we struggled through this—one, I can resonate with the trust thing. I remember saying to Dave, “It’s one thing that you’ve done it, but it’s a bigger issue that you’ve lied about it.” That betrayal hurts even more; but I think what happens for us as women is we don’t know what to do, and we don’t know what to do with it. So, I think your book gives us a place to go because I think, sometimes, when women get upset, a man will say, “Well, I can’t even tell you.” So, then we carry guilt around, and we don’t know what to do with our anger.

You take us on a healing journey that hasn’t been out there. I’m so glad you wrote this book because so many women are saying, “Help me. We need resources.”

Dave: What I’ve found is what you just said, “The healing journey is both sides.”

Ann: Yes.

Dave: As I read it, I felt the same thing, like—“Wow!” You really get a sense of the depth of your—of the pain you’ve caused. It makes you say, “Okay; I’ve got to take steps.”

Bob: Your relationship may be damaged by this intimate deception, and we’ve talked about wives whose husbands have transgressed. It goes the other way. There are men who have been deceived and whose wives have been the ones who have been unfaithful. There’s a path you can get on that can lead to healing. It just requires that both of you want to go there.

Sheri: I have seen couples go through insane situations; and if they are willing to both care for themselves and do the work, they can even grow into a stronger unit. I mean that’s a testimony to you guys. I mean look at what happened because you didn’t give up, and you were saying, “This isn’t okay.” You got help, and now from the pulpit, you are inviting others and people are coming. Isn’t that what it’s supposed to look like?

Ann: Those are the best stories because where Satan is trying to defeat us to steal, kill, and destroy, God is saying, “I have. I can work with you. I can use this horror and destruction in your life for good to help other people,” and there is something great about that.

Bob: He can bring beauty from ashes.

Ann: He can.

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