Bob: Early in his marriage, Cory Carlson had been unfaithful. He’d been able to successfully hide that from his wife; but God started working on him, and he knew he had to come clean.

Cory: I remember driving home that night with, “Alright, I’m going to say it. I’m ready for the consequences, whatever they may be.” I’m driving home with this thought of, “No, no!”—like this last-minute bargaining—“This is between you and [me], God. I’m not going to/I won’t make anymore mistakes, I’m all committed to You. This is a deal.” I just couldn’t get over that hump that I had to come clean.

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Tuesday, May 26th. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson; I’m Bob Lepine. You’ll find us online at FamilyLifeToday.com. It’s true that our sins have consequences. It’s also true that God can bring beauty from ashes. Cory Carlson joins us today to share a story of God’s redemptive work in his life and his marriage. Stay with us.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today. Thanks for joining us. If we went back 35 years and—

Dave: That’s a long time, Bob—35?

Bob: —if we asked you about work/life balance, back 35 years ago—

Dave: You know what I’m going to say.

Bob: I do know what you’re going to say.

Dave: Ask her.

Bob: Yes, how was his work/life balance back 35 years ago?

Dave: It might have been better then than now! [Laughter]

Ann: I think it was better, actually. I think 35 years ago wasn’t bad; but 30 years ago, it was really bad.
Bob: So it didn’t start off with Dave being, “I’m all paying attention to work and ignoring home.” That kind of grew over time?

Ann: Right.

Bob: Were you aware of the fact that things were out of balance?

Dave: No, I wish I could say I had self-awareness. I was not aware until my wife said, “What are you doing?” I was—

Ann: But you didn’t agree with me.

Dave: I would have said, “I am not a workaholic; I am balanced.” I was just in denial; I was out of control.

Bob: How many times did you say, “I need help,” before he heard you?

Ann: Too many to count.

Bob: Really?

Ann: Yes, I don’t think Dave heard me. I think he thought I was just a needy wife and a needy family, but he was conquering the world—which, that’s one of the reasons I married him—because I thought, “We’re going to change the world together for Jesus.”

Dave: Can we stop talking about me? [Laughter] Can we move on? [Laughter]

Bob: How many guys in the business world today do you think are where you were, life out of balance? As a pastor, you’re talking to guys all the time.

Dave: Yes, and I would say the number that comes to my mind is 80 percent.

Bob: Really?

Dave: Eight out of ten. Again, I’m basing that on guys that walk up in the auditorium, guys I talk to during the week, guys in small groups. You just look at them and they’re going, going, going. They’re getting up at five; they’re coming home at eight or nine.

Bob: Yes.

Ann: I got a letter one time from a wife—she went to our church—and she said, “I feel like I’ve been totally deceived and duped.” She said, “I started, marrying my husband, I loved him: he’s an achiever, he’s a sharp guy; but man, he went after me, and he did
everything he could to get me. He was romantic, he spent time with me, he got to know me, he opened his life to me."

She said, “We’ve been married a year. I feel like he was on the hunt; he saw me, he shot me, he bagged me, he put me on the mantel, and now he’s off for another hunt.”

Bob: “Bought that company, and now I’m on to the next company,” right?—yes.

Well, we have a guest joining us today, Cory Carlson. Cory today is doing executive coaching and working with guys in business and in ministry, who are struggling with work/life balance. Part of the reason you’re doing this is because you went through your own struggle. In fact, your struggle led you outside of your marriage for awhile.

Cory: Unfortunately, it did.

Bob: Did you/by the way, Cory’s written a book called *Win at Home First*, which is all about work/life balance. This is a part of what you talk to people in the business world and in the ministry world about today. Were you aware that your life was out of balance when it was?

Cory: No, I was not aware of it being out of balance. What I also found—I wasn’t aware that I was going to places to find my worth, to find my value, to find my identity. I was pursuing a variety of different things, not knowing that that’s what I was looking for. I was longing for—you know, it’s that idea that only God can fill the void in our heart.

In my 20s, it was a pursuit of climbing that corporate ladder. On great days, I felt like I was the man: things were going well; I was getting the promotion. Then on those other days, maybe I’d be thinking about my marriage; or it’s like: “Well, that’s maybe not exactly how it wants to be,” or “We’re arguing a little bit.” Then I started to think, “Well, maybe my marriage isn’t great.” There were kind of these different things, where I kept taking my questions, to who I was, to temporary things. Eventually, it ended up catching up to me in a couple of different ways. From a marriage standpoint, I would basically take my questions to her, “Am I a good enough man?” In the process, we’d have some different tensions.

You mentioned earlier about the hunt that the man had. One thing I work with executives on, and talk about is: “Are you pursuing your wife?” “Are you actually going on dates?” It’s one of the first things/it’s like the low-hanging fruit, when I get a client, is, “When’s the last time you went on a date?” It’s like, “Umm; Uhhhh.” [Laughter] It’s, “Hold up; if you don’t know the last time you went on a date, we have to start there.” I have some really fun stories with friends and clients that we start there, and we start seeing progress.

But in my situation, we were spending time together. We were going on double dates—it’s a double income/no kids—was how it was in our 20s. We were going out a lot—
hosting parties, going to parties, going on dinner dates with other couples—just spending time together, but never together.

What ended up happening was, at that same time, I was very busy pursuing my career: working all the time/traveling, I started to see that I didn’t have any guys of deep friendships. I had a lot of surface-level friends, but I wasn’t talking about the depths of my marriage or the depths of struggles I was having. So when Holly and I would get in an argument, I thought, “I’m the only guy having this argument.”

I’d go talk to my buddies, and it sounds like life is amazing. Here, I’m thinking, “What’s our problem?” I ended up taking my questions to another woman, who I thought: “Hey, she’s laughing at my jokes. She thinks I’m funny. She…” It became, obviously, a very slippery slope. It ended up—unfortunately and regrettably—I had an affair.

Ann: But it was a secret.

Cory: It was a secret, yes.

Ann: Your wife had no idea.

Cory: My wife had no idea.

I grew up in an awesome home. I think, when I look back at my home, I think maybe that was part of the reason that I ended up having an affair—not that my parents are to blame at all; that’s not it—but I never, ever saw them argue. My mom died when I was 15 from cancer. I don’t know if they never fought because my dad just had an enormous amount of grace, and so it just rolled off. I don’t know if they did it behind doors; I just didn’t know.

We’d start to have our arguments of work/life balance or whatever it may be. I started to think: “Wait, wait; this isn’t on me. This must be on my wife; because my parents had it all figured out, and they were battling with cancer.” My buddies weren’t ever talking about their marriages being a challenge.

Here I am, thinking I’m on my own island of having marital issues, so I ended up having this affair; did not get caught. I get promoted and transferred to Denver; moved to Denver. We are not really going to church frequently; because every time my wife would ask, “Let’s go to church,” it’s like—I mean, I grew up in a church. I don’t want to sit in a church and hear about character when I have a skeleton in my closet.

Dave: Is that something you were carrying?

Cory: Oh, absolutely carrying.

Dave: Yes.
Cory: Absolutely carrying. I was carrying it so much, and I see this—not that affair is always the issue—but I see this in so many other people, where we know we are losing somewhere. We go wherever we can to get our wins. So if marriage is not working well, your parenting’s not working well, or whatever, it’s like, “I’m going to work; I’m going to get it there.”

Dave: You’re moving up in the business world, and yet there’s this secret. How’d you deal with that?

Cory: My wife said, “Hey, maybe we need to start going to church.” I could only run from that question so many times; because she knew I was supposed to be a man of faith, grew up in a Christian home. That was probably one of the reasons she married me.

We started going to this church in Denver. The pastor’s name, Jay Pathack. I started to meet people in the leadership team. They were very obvious about pursuing Jesus, but they were also very vulnerable and honest about their own brokenness. In that—in having conversations and hearing about the struggles they were having/whatever it may have been: marriage, porn, finances—God started working in my heart about this situation.

It was interesting; as I was kind of in these conversations, I never really thought I was going to come clean about my affair. I think God was just softening my heart.

Bob: So, you have this secret that’s hidden away, and nobody’s ever going to find out. I mean, it’s kind of like—a lot of guys will look at that and go, “Okay, I got a pass here.”

Dave: Yes.

Ann: I’ve talked to a lot of people that have been in that situation that say, “This is what I did; it’s on me. I don’t want to give this to my spouse, because why should I make them suffer? It’s over.” Was that part of your thinking, too? “Why will I hurt her? This will just disrupt everything.”

Cory: Absolutely. It was also, “Wait, God.” Things are going great in my life: I just got promoted; I’m making the most money I’ve ever made; things are going well with the team. The integration into this new team is fantastic. I’m in a city I love, because I have family there; and things are going great. “Why would I mess this all up?” It was almost like there was this argument with God: “Hey, You’re giving me signs things are good, so let’s just keep moving this along.”

Bob: What brought this to the surface; and what forced you to say, “I have to come clean with this”?
Cory: I was invited to participate in a volunteer leadership program at this church. As I'm in this night, Jay's doing a talk on character. As he's talking about character, all of a sudden, I had a God moment; I had an encounter where, out of nowhere, I kind of heard—I don't know if it was audible or what I just heard in my own self—"You have to come clean of your affair." I was like, "What?"

Dave: It was that clear?

Cory: It was *that* clear.

Dave: Yes.

Cory: It was like: "Who said that? What's going on?" I just kept having this wrestling match with God: "No, I don't have to come clean of my affair. I've been promoted. Things are going great. We're starting to get along."—all this different stuff.

Later, in that evening, sitting in that chair, I started to have a peace. A phrase I heard—and I really didn't know much about it then, and I've learned more since then—is, "You need to hand over your story for a greater story." I really didn't know what that meant at that time, but I started to think about it. I remember driving home that night with: “Alright, I'm going to say it; and "I'm ready for the consequences, whatever they may be." I'm driving home with this thought of, "No, no!"—like this last-minute bargaining—"This is between You and [me], God. I'm not going to/I won't make anymore mistakes; I'm all committed to You." I just couldn't get over that hump that I had to come clean.

I came home that night, and my wife was asleep. I was like, “Perfect! Thanks, God!” [Laughter]

Dave: Another sign from God.

Cory: It's a sign, like, "If He wanted me to tell her, she'd be awake, sitting on the couch, ready to talk." [Laughter]

Dave: —"with a sign, ‘Talk to me.’"

Cory: Yes; “Talk to me”!

I went to bed. The next day, I got up, kind of went through my normal motions. Over the years, when I was hiding this, if the heaviness came, I'd go for a run; or if it was at night, I'd have a drink; or I would work harder and send out a bunch of emails. I mean, it's unfortunate; it's amazing how the devil can work and quickly pull you away from that sin. I mean, obviously the devil loves nothing more than a kept secret, right?
Later that day, I— “I’m going to tell her tonight.” When we got home, I put the girls to bed and then came down and told her. It was not cupcakes and balloons; it was awful. I mean, rightfully so; doors slammed and yelling.

But from that moment, we began a journey of figuring this out. We both grew in our faith at that moment. Fast forward, this summer, we celebrate 20 years. It’s been amazing. I don’t think she thinks about it—I mean, I’m sure there are moments she’ll think about it, especially—the interesting part about this book, it’s part of the intro.

I hired a writing coach for this book. My intro was not about coming clean of my affair. [Laughter] My intro was a neat client story/a super fun client story—I had that—and then I go into the book, saying: “We’re all broken. I had an affair”—comma—“this may happen to you”—comma—[Laughter] My writing coach said, “No; if you want anyone to read this book—

Bob: “—you have to tell that story.”

Cory: “—you need to come tell that story.” I was like, “Oh, no.”

Bob: Yes.

Cory: “This has been kind of fun to talk with a couple men here and there and kind of…” I ended up writing the introduction and then shared it with Holly to say: “Here’s the advice I got from Chad, the writing coach; and here you go. Do you want to read it? Are you good with it?”

She read it, and she was good with it. She did say: “You need to fix the ending. You make it sound like I said: ‘Okay, that’s great. You had an affair; let’s keep going.’” I had to expand on that a little bit more; but she was good, ready to know.

She also, in that whole process—when I first told her, it was a very—you kind of feel like you’re the only ones that experience this. Then from Denver to when this book came out, she has been a part of, as well as, heard my stories. Once you start sharing this vulnerability, it’s amazing how it’s helped others.

Bob: Yes.

Cory: That’s the greater story. Back to that night—when I felt God say, “You need to hand over your story for a greater story,”—the great story is, through that vulnerability—sharing my brokenness, sharing the restoration that Jesus had in my life/in our marriage—it’s just been neat to see. I think that’s the reason she was willing to put herself out there as well.

Dave: Go back to a little bit about—okay, slamming doors, yelling—I’ve been there with Ann in terms of sharing a struggle about porn 30/40 years ago, so I know that moment.
It didn’t change the next day. She wasn’t like: “Oh, okay. Now I’m all good. I slept on it, and…” No, there was a process. What did that look like for you guys? How did your marriage get restored? How did forgiveness happen?

Cory: The advantage I had—and I don’t want to make this sound like a way to do it—is she had seen a change in my behavior along the way. I had, at least—in full transparency—I had that in my favor, where she had seen I was making some different choices I didn’t used to.

But there are still things, to this day, that I do that are showing building trust; like, whether we are texting neighborhood women about coordinating a play date, I copy Holly. I don’t want to get in a position; I don’t want to her to think anything. It could be communication like that: that I’m doing different things to show my trust.

There were times, early on with traveling, I would not always answer the phone when she called. Or if I was at the bar with work guys—even, I mean, all innocent; just work guys—I wouldn’t answer the phone, just like, “I’ll talk to her tomorrow; she knows I’m at work.” It’s like, “Forget that.” If she calls now, I always answer. Even if I’m in a client meeting or a prospect meeting, I say, “I have to take this real quick.” Answer the phone: “Is everything okay? Great. I need to let you go; I’ll call you in an hour,”—just starting to show those signs.

Now, I’m not perfect—right?—I’m still/there are still selfish things I can do.

Ann: But you really built back that trust, and you opened up your life freely, to say, “I want you to know all of me.”

Cory: I built back that trust; yes, yes.

Ann: That’s a big deal.

Bob: It is; to put some boundaries/some hedges in place, to say, “Okay, I’m going to demonstrate my trustworthiness and not just presume that I’ve earned it because I confessed.” I think a lot of guys will confess and think, “You should trust me now, because I confessed.”

Dave: I’ve heard that! You’ve heard it, too, Bob.

Bob: Right.

Dave: Even at the Weekend to Remember®, couples will come up and say—a lot of times, guys will come up to me and say, “I had an affair; I told her. It’s been years. She still—the Bible says she should forgive me, and she’s still not forgiven me. She should trust me.”
I always use this example: “You lose trust in a second; you rebuild it over years.”

**Bob:** Yes.

**Dave:** You destroy a Lego® thing in one hit, and it would take you a week to rebuild that complicated thing. You’re doing that; you’re rebuilding trust.

I would just say to the husband, who’s hiding something right now,—

**Ann:** —or a wife.

**Dave:** I was going to say, “…or a wife”; but I just know, as you’re listening to this program—and you have that one or five things—today’s the day. I’ve been there; you’ve been there—you just shared it, Cory—there’s no life in a hidden life. As long as it’s in the dark, it wins. The second you bring it into the light—and that’s scary, and it’s hard, and there’s going to be fallout—it is the first step to freedom. So today’s the day.

I mean, there’s a guy—he’s got websites going; he has something going on—and probably some women—God is using this program today to say: “It’s time.” You want a new life? It starts right here.

**Bob:** Did it take weeks or months for your wife to forgive you?

**Cory:** I would say immediately—immediately may not be the right word; maybe a few days—forgive. But the trust piece, that took time.

**Bob:** Right.

**Cory:** On her side of the story is: right after I told her, we had some doors slam; but she felt a “It will be okay,” kind of came over her. She didn’t know what that meant, like, “How’s this all going to play out?”

Thanks to Holly and her faith, she leaned into that moment from the Holy Spirit of, “It’s going to be okay”; she kept going back to that. I’m sure there were times—maybe all the way up to today—where she may get frustrated and she can rest in, “It’s going to be okay.”

**Bob:** I think part of that—you said that she had seen change in your character that gave her some confidence there is a new you at play here. But it’s also—you’re the one who brought the secret out of the darkness into the light.

Dave, to your point about somebody who needs to do it today, there’s a big difference whether you’re the one who confesses your sin or whether it gets exposed later.

**Dave:** You get caught, yes.
Bob: That’s a big difference in terms of what the restoration and healing looks like.

Dave: Right.

Bob: You come forward and say: “The Lord’s put this on my heart, and I’ve just been under conviction. I have to share this, and I know this is going to be hard for you to hear.” For you to bring that up is an indication, even to your betrayed spouse, that God’s doing something. It’s different than if your spouse hears, five years later, from your ex-girlfriend, who texts her and says, “You never knew this happened, but…”; and you get busted. Now, it’s harder to rebuild trust, when you were outed rather than you being the one who brought it to the table.

I think one of the ways we start to rebuild trust is we demonstrate to one another that we understand what our priorities ought to be, and we start to show evidence that our spiritual life matters, that home matters more than work. That’s really the thesis of your book; and it’s a mentor guide for men and women, who need to make sure we have our priorities in order.

You can go to our website, FamilyLifeToday.com, to find out how to get a copy of Cory Carlson’s book, Win at Home First. Go to FamilyLifeToday.com to order, or call to order: 1-800-FL-TODAY is our number. Again, the website is FamilyLifeToday.com. You can also call 1-800-358-6329 to order a copy of the book. Again, that’s 1-800-“F” as in family, “L” as in life, and then the word, “TODAY.” The book is called Win at Home First by Cory Carlson.

Now, we’re just a few days away from the end of May, which is significant for us, here at FamilyLife®. We had some friends of the ministry, who came to us back earlier this spring, back before COVID-19 was a thing really, and they said, “We’d like to encourage FamilyLife Today listeners to support the ministry of FamilyLife; so we’ll match every donation a listener makes, during the month of May, up to a total of $345,000.”

We were delighted by that, and even more delighted once the pandemic settled in; because this has been a challenging time for us, as a ministry, over the last several weeks. Having this matching gift is very significant right now.

We’re coming to those of you, who are regular FamilyLife Today listeners, and asking you to make as generous a donation as you can today, knowing that your donation is going to be matched, dollar for dollar, right now. Anyone who makes a donation, we’d love to send you, as a thank-you gift, a copy of Barbara Rainey’s new book, My Heart, Ever His, a collection of prayers that Barbara has written. It’s a beautiful book, and I think a book that’s going to be helpful for you in your personal times with the Lord.

In addition, if you sign on to become a monthly supporter of FamilyLife—what we call a Legacy Partner—over the next 12 months, your donations are going to be matched,
dollar for dollar/all of them. We’ll send you, as an extra thank-you gift, a certificate so you and your spouse can attend an upcoming Weekend to Remember marriage getaway when those resume in the fall. Or you can pass that certificate on to someone else you’d like to send as your guest. All of that as a thank-you gift for becoming a monthly supporter of FamilyLife, a Legacy Partner.

You can make a donation or sign up as a Legacy Partner online when you go to FamilyLifeToday.com; or if it’s easier, just call us at 1-800-FL-TODAY. Thank you for your ongoing support of this ministry; we appreciate it. You’re the one who makes FamilyLife Today possible for people all around the world, and we’re grateful for your partnership with us.

Now, tomorrow, we want to talk about the priorities of life and how we arrange them properly. We’ll talk about our spiritual life; we’ll talk about our relationships; we’ll talk about our physical bodies; we’ll talk about developing our minds; and we’ll talk about our financial priorities. Cory Carlson’s going to be back with us tomorrow. I hope you can be back as well.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, along with our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our hosts, Dave and Ann Wilson, I’m Bob Lepine. We will see you next time for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

FamilyLife Today is a production of FamilyLife of Little Rock, Arkansas; a Cru® Ministry. Help for today. Hope for tomorrow.

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