

When the Vow (Almost) Breaks

On the surface, Bob and Audrey Meisner's marriage appeared fine. But when infidelity hit—along with an unexpected pregnancy—they faced a trial few relationships survive.

Audrey Meisner had just finished sharing her testimony of God's forgiveness at a church in New Orleans when a young married woman approached her sobbing. The woman confessed she had had an affair and didn't know what to do. Her husband was not a believer, and their marriage was in jeopardy.

Audrey didn't judge the woman. Rather, she was able to empathize with her. Nearly nine years earlier Audrey herself was in a similar situation. Except Audrey's husband, Bob, was a believer, and she gave birth to a child as a result of her affair.

"I thought that my whole life was done," Audrey recalls today.

Yet what seemed like the end for Bob and Audrey's marriage turned out to be a new beginning for this couple who now travel the globe sharing their powerful testimony of love, failure, forgiveness and redemption at churches and marriage conferences. They published their story in a book titled *Marriage Undercover*, and their account will also be featured in the March issue of *All You* magazine, a Time Inc. publication that covers women's issues.

"The whole story is not about adultery, it's about the gospel—that Jesus paid the price for my shame, and I don't have to carry it," says Audrey, who eight years ago gave birth to Robert, their youngest child.

The couple, who are hosts of *It's a New Day!*—a daily one-hour Christian television show based in Winnipeg,

Manitoba—acknowledge that their story is, in fact, a love story. “It’s about the extravagance of the love of God,” Bob says.

Sitting on the patio of their home in north Phoenix on a sunny day, the couple reflects on their ordeal and the lessons learned through the pain they suffered. Bob notes that many couples miss the goal of marriage.

“The goal of marriage is not oneness; it’s the result,” he says. Oneness in marriage doesn’t happen overnight, he believes, and couples have to constantly work at it.

The night Audrey told Bob about her affair, he called on marriage-counseling expert Leo Godzich, author of the book *Is God in Your Marriage?* and chairman and founder of the National Association of Marriage Enhancement. Godzich spoke by phone to the hurting couple. Primarily he spoke to Bob on the principle of “covering,” taken from the Bible, in Proverbs 25:2.

“I said: ‘What’s done is done. What I need to know is if you’re going to be Christ-like enough to pull this family together,’” Godzich told *Charisma*.

“There’s not a marriage that can’t be restored,” he says. “I’ve had people who’ve tried to kill each other be restored.”

Bob certainly didn’t like the fact that the conversation was being directed toward him and not Audrey. After all, she was the one who messed up, he believed. In his anger, Bob wanted to call the elders and leaders in their church together to discuss a solution for Audrey’s sin. “I didn’t want her to get off that easily.”

Godzich said he knew the Meisners’ marriage would survive if they got their marriage back to a “Bible-based, Christ-centered and Holy Spirit-powered perspective.” He counseled them to share the information only on a need-to-know basis and again challenged Bob to cover his wife’s wound and not expose

it. That meant sleeping in the same bed with his wife that very night and not submitting to a “spirit of divorce.”

Reluctantly, Bob followed the advice, but it was one of the toughest nights of his life. “Every happy memory of the past 17 years was gone,” he says. “It was hell that entire night.”

From that moment forward the couple struggled to hang on to their shaky marriage. Bob struggled with forgiveness, hurt and anger while Audrey wrestled with self-forgiveness and guilt. Both say their marital issue happened when they tried to juggle too many major responsibilities.

Over the Edge

At the time of the affair, Bob and Audrey were busy raising a new family, working on a daily TV show and serving as pastors of a young church in Winnipeg. Outwardly they had the look of success, but inwardly the hectic schedule, especially the church responsibilities, were taking a toll on Audrey.

“I love to have fun, but all the responsibilities at church sort of pushed me over the edge,” she says. Bob, looking back on that time, says the couple were “dysfunctional” but didn’t realize it.

Audrey developed a friendship with a male member of the church who needed help. The friendship, though innocent at the start, began evolving into something more when the young man started to flirt.

The flirting progressed to physical touching in which he would massage her feet. Still, Audrey didn’t think anything of it because, she says, “I felt like I was in control.” Before she realized it she became hooked on the attention she was receiving from the man. “I felt really good because I got noticed.”

“He tapped into that place where she needed acceptance,” Bob

notes. The attention, he says, was Audrey's way of medicating her pain. During this time Bob became suspicious of the relationship when he noticed a change in the young man's behavior. "He became standoffish and uncomfortable around me."

Audrey denied that anything was going on between them when Bob questioned her. "I didn't humble myself," she says. "The compromise starts when you enjoy the attention. I found out that there was no such thing as a small compromise."

"Temptation only has power when it's feeding a lack in your life," Bob chimes in.

After denying the relationship to Bob, the physical contact became more intense. Audrey says: "It was a very short trip before the relationship became sexual."

Devastated that she would do such a thing, Audrey became confused, finding herself lying to Bob and the children in order to be with the man.

"I felt like a selfish teenager—I would cry and then I thought for a fleeting moment I could maintain my marriage and continue the relationship," she says. Eventually, the guilt became too much for her. After three weeks she ended the affair and told the man he had to leave town. She said they could never be friends again. Guilt set in swiftly for her.

"The first thing God told me was that I had to tell Bob," she says. Although afraid and reluctant to do so, she got the courage to confess the affair to Bob. She knew hiding it would eventually destroy their marriage. However, at this point, she wasn't so sure that telling him would save it.

Two days after the man left town Audrey approached Bob when they were both alone in the office. She knelt at his feet and, through tears, told him.

One night, after a meeting with marriage counselor Godzich—who

Audrey says nailed them to the core—the couple began praying together while looking each other in the eyes. “We were in so much pain we couldn’t even talk,” Bob says. Audrey adds: “Our pain was so different. He was angry, and I was dealing with shame.”

Nevertheless, they began to fight for the restoration of their marriage that night. They danced to a Marvin Gaye song and were intimate for the first time since the affair. But their ordeal was just beginning.

Everything Changes

The couple learned shortly thereafter that Audrey was pregnant. From the look on their faces when they got the news, their doctor must have realized something was wrong.

“He asked us if we wanted to continue with the pregnancy,” Audrey says. Without hesitation, however, they both answered in the affirmative.

“I thought my whole life was done,” Audrey says. “I might as well have died.”

She felt nervous because she knew her private sin would now become public. Her thoughts ranged from what life would be like raising a biracial child to being disqualified for ministry. She also was sure this would be the breaking point for their fragile marriage.

Bob, on the other hand, took the news a little better than expected. “It actually gave me direction as to what we needed to do. It changed everything,” he says. “Now I knew things would have to be different.”

Audrey told her parents the news out of desperation. They were in “total shock” when they heard, she says. “It surprised us because they were so committed,” says Betty, Audrey’s mother.

They also were surprised because Audrey was raised with strong Christian values. While offering support to her hurting daughter, Betty also pondered whether Bob would leave and what would happen to the children and ministry.

She recalls seeing her once-vibrant, lively daughter being reduced to a sobbing mass balled up in the corner of a room. "It was tough to witness," she says.

Audrey's father, Willard, said although they wanted to get involved, they refrained: "The danger was to get so involved that we'd mess up what God was doing." Willard did encourage his daughter by telling her that adultery was something she did, not who she was.

Audrey didn't think she had the strength to go forward with the pregnancy and, without telling Bob, called an abortion clinic. She said the person on the other end of the phone told her the clinic could send her 10 pills that would take care of the "problem." Knowing that wasn't God's will, Audrey hung up the phone, fell on her knees and begged God for a miscarriage so that people wouldn't find out about her infidelity.

Refuge and Restoration



By this time Bob decided the best way to handle the situation was for the couple to resign all their positions at the church and television ministry and move the family to Phoenix, where his father lived.

"People thought we were hiding. We weren't hiding—we were just trying to protect our family," Bob explains. "We weren't running from anything. Rather, we were going to a place of refuge."

Their resignations caught people by surprise. But staff members at the television station as well as some of the program's investors began asking questions. Betty said the television ministry went through a tough period after people

learned of the pregnancy. Some of the staff, upset by the news, resigned.

Bob and Audrey moved their family to Phoenix where they stayed with his father until they could get established. They had no jobs or prospects when they arrived, but God began to move supernaturally on their behalf.

Shortly after their relocation, Audrey gave birth to Robert Theodore Meisner, the couple's fourth child. Unlike his siblings, Robert is biracial, but was loved and embraced by the other children from day one. And they weren't the only ones eager to embrace the new child.

"We were in love with that baby long before it was born," Betty says.

Two years after Robert's birth, Audrey, although in love with her son, was still carrying the grief of the affair. "I hated the Audrey who did that," she says. She needed a divine intervention, which she received when God delivered her from her shame.

Today the Meisners no longer take each other for granted but are careful to pay attention to their marriage, which Bob says must be lived "face to face."

Sitting on their patio in Phoenix with the sun now high overhead, Bob pauses, thinks for a moment, and says: "Robert is such a gift."

Then, flashing the smile of a proud father, he adds, "He's my son."

Bruce Goolsby lives in Chandler, Ariz., where he and Michele, his wife, co-pastor Mosaic Church of Arizona.

Encouraged by this story? Visit *restore.* to find other stories of marriages that have been restored.