



FIERCE MARRIAGE

*RADICALLY PURSUING
EACH OTHER IN LIGHT OF
CHRIST'S RELENTLESS LOVE*

RYAN *AND* **SELENA FREDERICK**



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For Jesus, whose fierce, one-way love
is the only reason we're still married.

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Foreword

Your marriage isn't about you.

It's not even about your marriage.

Ultimately, your marriage is about proclaiming the power and glory of Jesus Christ.

That's the foundation from which Ryan and Selena write *Fierce Marriage*. When discussing conflict, Selena wisely points out, "Jesus is not just a means to a better life; he *is* the better life. . . . Christ is every answer."

The problem for most of us is the bent of our lives. Christianity is an extreme religion, but we try to live it in the margins. Jesus said to love the Lord our God with *all* our heart, soul, mind, and strength, but we pass this off as hyperbole. We think, *Surely half is better than none*.

The Christian life is about becoming centered on God (Matt. 6:33). We seek to love with his love, think his thoughts, and live for his will. When a soul is surrendered to God, it is focused on worship and service. Love God and love others. Praise God and be devoted to good works (Titus 2:14). Those are the two hinges on which the Christian life turns.

A marriage crashes when we *stop* asking, “What does it mean to worship God in this situation?” and “What good works can I do in this situation?” and *start* asking, “How can I get my own way?”

The only “fix” is for one or both spouses to re-center their lives around worship of and service for God. If husband and wife wake up with a commitment to worship and serve, they will be delighted in their marriage. If only one spouse wakes up with a commitment to worship and serve, that’s the spouse who will have the most joy in their marriage and be less vulnerable to disappointments within it.

Think of it this way: Has anyone ever lived with more peace, more joy, and more contentment than Jesus? Of course not. Yet his closest companions included a doubter, a couple of zealous hotheads, and a thief who became a traitor. None of their self-centeredness colored his days or his attitude, because Jesus lived a life of worship and service.

Fierce Marriage is the story of a couple learning and striving to put Christ above all else, in all matters of marriage. In the words of the Fredericks, “You don’t fight for your marriage as much as Christ uses your marriage to fight for you. You don’t pursue your spouse’s heart as much as Christ uses your spouse to pursue your heart. You don’t prize your spouse’s affection with nearly the same ferocity with which Christ prizes yours. . . . That’s the most exciting (albeit counterintuitive) aspect of marriage! It’s not about you. It’s all about Jesus. It always has been.”

Gary Thomas
author of *Sacred Marriage* and *Cherish*

Introduction

This isn't your typical marriage book. At least we don't think it is. In our experience, there are many valuable resources about marriage, particularly in modern Christendom. We've observed that books in the Christian marriage category tend to fall on either side of what we call the hopeful-helpful intersection, which sometimes proves problematic. Here's what we mean.

Hopeful books offer what we need for eternal hope: reminders of the gospel, deep explorations of scriptural truth, and theologically rich prose. While these books are incredible, they can leave us wondering where we should go from there. Our hearts and heads are filled but our hands are left wondering what's next. The reader is charged with discovering the particulars of how to apply their newfound knowledge.

Helpful books are the inverse. They offer plenty of practical advice—action steps—without troubling too much with the underlying theological truths behind them. The tragedy with these books is that readers rarely learn the reasons behind the actions they take. We hear what to do without

understanding why we are doing it—not truly, anyway. Our behavior changes for a time but our beliefs are largely unaffected. In our years of speaking with and ministering to married couples, this has proven troublesome.

We wanted to write a book that was different. If we were going to add another book to the Christian marriage book stockpile, we wanted it all. We wanted a book that infused readers with deep, beautiful, eternal gospel truth while equipping them with time-tested, wisdom-fueled advice for how to apply it. In short, we envisioned a book that could meet readers at the intersection of hopeful and helpful.

Fierce Marriage is our attempt at exactly that. It's our "marriage manifesto." Our modern tell-all. An exposé revealing all we believe marriage can be according to the Bible. We've done the exegesis of Scripture, read the commentaries, compiled the research, and done our absolute best to synthesize gospel-centered help that is rooted in the never-failing hope of Christ. We've worked hard to discern how much to expect from you, how much you should expect from us, and what you can expect to have once you finish this book.

We made a decision early on to expect much from you, dear reader. We expect that you want to know more than just a few new techniques for helping your marriage. We expect that you want to grow deeper in your understanding of Scripture and how it applies to your marriage. And we expect that you want to learn to trust Jesus more—with your heart, and with that of your spouse.

From us, you can expect our best work. You can expect honesty. We've shared stories in these pages that you will most likely never read elsewhere—they're the stories we'd share with you if we got dinner together. They're stories of

pain, joy, romance, anger, and deep conviction. We've shared them all here, hopefully for your benefit. Finally, and most of all, you can expect from us a heavy reliance on Scripture and commitment to what it says.

Now, from this book you can expect order with a heavy dose of levity. The following words are a distillation of ideas that have been passed through layer after layer of theological and editorial oversight. We're not theologians in the scholarly sense, so we have asked smarter men and women than us to keep us in line. The end result, we hope, is a relevant interpretation of timeless marital truths rooted in Scripture. The chapters of this book are loosely but intentionally organized to be hopeful first and helpful second.

We will start by sharing a key event in our lives and marriage that has forever shaped us. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 unpack foundational, irreplaceable concepts for Christian marriage (the meanings of the gospel, covenant, and love). Chapters 5 through 9 build on those foundational, hope-filled principles to provide gospel-centered help in the key areas of marriage: priorities, communication, money, sex, and conflict. Finally, chapter 10 casts a vision for what can be had and extends an invitation to those who will have it.

While we don't know everything, we promise to share what we do know honestly. We're not counselors or ordained ministers, nor do we claim to have all the answers. All we have is Jesus and more than half our lives together, and all we can do is talk about what he's done. We do know one thing for sure: we wouldn't be married today if it wasn't for the loving kindness and infinite grace of Christ.

Finally, thank you. Thank you for inviting us into your life as you read this book. And thank you for allowing us to

Introduction

speaking into your marriage, your most sacred and personal relationship.

We hope and pray that this book blesses you and your marriage for years to come.

Stay fierce,

Ryan and Selena

1

Our Swiss Adventure

The Early Years

Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

C. S. Lewis

RYAN

Selena and I celebrated our second anniversary on a jumbo jet somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean. By the time we boarded that flight, we had already faced doubt, division, and financial ruin. And I had almost died. Seriously. Here's how it happened.

We got married in early September just before our junior year of college. Almost two years later and just a few weeks before graduation, neither of us had strong career prospects. I was a janitor for the mid-rise apartment building where we

lived (for the record, I preferred to be called a Master of the Custodial Arts). Selena worked as a barista at Starbucks.

Somewhere between studying for finals and procrastinating, Selena found a job opportunity on an equestrian recruitment website. She's always been passionate about horses—riding, jumping, grooming, and everything else.

When she discovered a job offer for an “au pair/groom” position at a private show-jumping facility near Zürich, Switzerland, it piqued her interest. She didn't think I'd go for it because the pay was totally unrealistic. However, when she half-jokingly proposed the opportunity, my response surprised her: “Let's do it!”

“Wait. What?” She was shocked.

“I'm serious, let's do it!”

That evening Selena emailed the person who posted the job, and in less than a week she was hired for the position. I was a “tagalong” hire who would perform random tasks around the equestrian facility. Together we would make two thousand Swiss francs per month, around eighteen hundred dollars at the time. It wasn't enough to live on, but we didn't care. We'd make it work.

After our college graduation ceremony, we were bursting with anticipation as we packed our bags, sold everything we could, and parked my bright yellow 1977 VW Bus in Selena's mom's garage. (I couldn't bring myself to sell it.) I'd miss her, but “The Twinkie” would have to wait there until we returned. Three days later we boarded a plane to spend a year in Europe.

There we were, a couple in our early twenties headed out for an adventure we'd never forget. We had seen the pictures of where we were going to work and live, and the facility

looked like a dream—nestled in rural Switzerland with a breathtaking view of the Alps.

We had no clue that the adventure was doomed weeks before we boarded that first airplane.

Sabotaged by Sickness

My symptoms first became obvious on our layover in Copenhagen. I'd had a lingering cough for two months prior to our departure, but it was totally manageable until then. I assumed it was just allergies or, at worst, a mild case of bronchitis. Regardless, I'd been able to power through my shifts as a janitor, drink a few energy drinks, study all night, and go to class in the morning.

Sleep was truly an option during college, and one I'd opted out of far too many times. At one point during finals week I stayed up for three days straight in order to finish my capstone presentation. I faithfully lived my college-life motto: "When in doubt, caffeinate."

The long hours working and studying caught up with me in Europe. By the time we arrived at the Zürich airport, my body ached, I had constant chills, and nothing I did made me feel warmer. We both reasoned that I had a cold or viral sickness and it would pass in a few days. I figured it was my body detoxing from the long hours and horrible diet from the previous months (and by that I mean my whole college career).

Our new boss, Dani, met us at the baggage claim. We loaded our luggage into his car and headed off to his home—our workplace—in a small town about thirty minutes away. We would get settled, get acquainted, and within thirty-six

hours, get to work. I informed Dani of my sickness and he agreed that I could take a few days off to feel better before starting my job.

As we discovered, the Swiss work ethic is just shy of super-human! Our work hours were 6:00 a.m. until well after 7:00 p.m., Monday through Saturday. At one point we calculated our hourly rate was around thirty cents per hour. Ridiculous, I know, but what an adventure!

Weeks passed, and instead of feeling better, I felt worse. Dani grew suspect of my sickness. He was a man of impressive stature, both physically and socially, and the closest thing to a real-life Terminator I've ever seen. He was six feet three inches tall, wore a tattered black leather jacket, spoke at least three languages, and had successfully built a small commercial empire through hard work and business acumen. He was a self-made man with a disdain for slackers.

Honestly, I don't blame him for his suspicion. We had been there for several weeks, and I had yet to work a full day. For all he knew, I was a "lazy American." I certainly felt that way. We had flown halfway around the world in pursuit of Selena's dream of riding horses in Europe, and I could hardly even get out of bed.

At the advice of a friend (and because we didn't want to pay full price for medicine), we had purchased traveler's insurance for thirty-five dollars per month. It wasn't in the budget, but we thought it would be a good investment. We decided it was time to use it. With some translation help from Dani, I scheduled an appointment for the next day with a small doctor's office a few kilometers away.

We didn't know what was wrong, and as it turned out, the doctors didn't know either. My doctor did the best he

could with the equipment he had on-site. He deduced that I had an aggressive bacterial infection that was best treated by antibiotics, pain medicine, and rest. He prescribed the appropriate medications and told me to call back in a week.

I left, made a beeline to the closest pharmacy, and swallowed those pills as quickly as I could. The medicine helped! Finally I felt better and my energy was restored. I carried on with my tasks as a farmhand: shoveling dung, building and repairing barns, and anything else Dani assigned. I didn't enjoy the job, *per se*, but getting fresh air felt incredible.

My enthusiasm didn't last long though. While the pain medication made me feel better, the antibiotics weren't curing me. My symptoms subsided while the problem—whatever it was—grew worse. Nonetheless, I pushed through. I worked every day until my strength was gone.

Every morning I woke up, popped a painkiller, took my amoxicillin, and started work. By noon my body was throbbing and weak. So I'd take a thirty-minute power nap, down another painkiller, and get out to the barn. Sometimes I'd finish the entire day; other times I was too weak to continue. Eventually I became incapable of working as the sickness overwhelmed my body.

One morning, Dani called a meeting with us and his wife, Sabine. It didn't take long to realize where the conversation was going. Dani and Sabine were unsatisfied with our performance. Though Selena worked very hard, Dani said she only completed the tasks of "one third of a person." They had hired two workers and, in their minds, we equaled less than one. I was nearly useless with some unidentified sickness and Selena, though well intentioned, was ill-suited for the job. (To be honest, there were some dynamics going on

with other workers at the facility that may have influenced their perception. But it's not worth getting into. Besides, perception is reality, right?)

I felt helpless. I understood Dani's frustration with my output, but I was powerless to do anything about it. Was I the reason our dream—Selena's dream—would end here? Was I the reason for our failure?

To make matters worse, we were supposed to teach their five-year-old daughter English in our off time. She was very shy and hardly warmed up to either of us. We managed to teach her ten words. Dani and Sabine added that to the pile of failed expectations.

After twenty minutes of hearing their disappointment, we settled on an arrangement. We had two weeks to prove we were worth keeping around. Otherwise we were fired and had to return to the States.

Disaster Deepens

Selena and I spent the evening discussing possible ways to work harder and faster. What if we woke up earlier and slept less? How about sweeping and mucking stalls in a new pattern to reduce the time required? It took a few hours to get there, but eventually we resigned all hope of staying.

Any pace increase would be unsustainable and the pay wasn't worth it. We could barely afford groceries, let alone travel throughout Europe. Even if we could, we wouldn't get far with one day off each week. Also our student loans, although deferred, would be knocking on our financial door soon, so any money we might have "saved" was already spoken for.

Reality is such a buzzkill.

After about two hours of deliberating, we decided to propose a new plan to Dani and Sabine. We would spend the next two weeks working our tails off, then we'd pack our nonessentials into their plastic crates and toss them in their basement before hopping on a train to explore Europe for two to three weeks. We had no clue how we'd pay for the trip, but that wasn't important. I started planning our trip on an Excel spreadsheet, meticulously mapping the days, train times, and hostel options one by one.

We were literally going for broke. Our original plan had failed, but at least we'd go out in a blaze of glory!

The next morning we spoke with Dani and told him our idea. He agreed to let us store our stuff at their place. I could tell he was relieved to end our arrangement.

I may have been short on strength but I still had plenty of pride. I wanted to prove to Dani that I wasn't lazy—that he had made a huge mistake doubting the Fredericks. I wanted him to wish we would stay.

We returned to our jobs with refreshed vigor. My final task was a big one: I had to remove, level, and rebuild the floors of four horse stalls. It may not sound like much, but for one guy who had never done anything like it, it would take all of two weeks. I was determined to get it done. I had to convince myself—and Selena, I thought—that I wasn't the reason we couldn't cut it.

I started by prying up the old rubber mats that lined the floors of each stall. The smell of horse urine was so strong I had to hold my breath while pulling each two-foot by two-foot square up to set it aside.

The next step was to level the floor, which was now a sloppy, muddy, pee-soaked mess. Dani had a pile of gravel

delivered and waiting nearby. I shoveled the material into a wheelbarrow, dumped multiple loads in each stall, and compacted the new base with the underside of the shovel. After some fine adjustments the foundation was ready. All of this took about three days, and I went to bed exhausted each night.

My next task was to place twelve-inch hexagon paver bricks on the gravel to create solid flooring for the horses. The bricks had been delivered fifty feet away from the project site. I got to work loading them into the wheelbarrow and carting them across the rugged terrain to my site. The labor was tough, but with my mysterious sickness it seemed impossible.

Surely I'd start feeling better soon. I just had to work harder. I had to prove I wasn't the reason for our dream's demise.

Again I pressed on with the help of my pain meds. The only problem was that my antibiotic medication ran out on Friday and my doctor's office was closed on the weekends. So I doubled down on the painkillers and finished Saturday's work the best I could.

Throughout the whole ordeal, I experienced wild swings of hot and cold flashes. One moment I'd be shivering so violently from chills that I needed to soak in a blazing-hot bath. The next moment I'd be so hot I would drip sweat like I was in a military-style CrossFit class. The Sunday my pain meds ran out was the worst yet. The hot/cold cycles were amplified and there was no chance I'd work the next morning. I told Dani I needed to rest and mentioned I should go into town to see my doctor and refill my prescription. He informed me that it was Swiss National Day and no businesses were open. I was out of luck.

I spent Monday trying to rest, except I was feeling worse than ever. Selena and I started to worry. Whatever this sickness was, it was accelerating and there was nowhere to go and nobody who could help. I hunkered down for the evening and decided to call my doctor as soon as his office opened.

The next morning was much chillier than usual, and it had started to rain. I immediately called my doctor's office once business hours resumed, but no one picked up. I asked Dani if he could give me a ride; he was apologetic but unavailable. I asked to borrow the bicycle, but Sabine had taken it for the day. My only option was to walk the four kilometers by myself in the rain.

I couldn't take another day of this, so I headed out on foot.

The Awful Truth

About forty minutes later I arrived in the lobby of my doctor's office. Usually I would practice my German as I spoke with the receptionist and nurses. Today was different; I had nothing German to say. Thankfully most Swiss people speak English pretty well.

"I need help, now!" I said with urgency and an elevated volume.

"But you don't have an appointment," the receptionist replied, a little puzzled.

I'm sure I was a sad sight to behold: shivering out of control, soaked from head to toe, and the color of my face matching the stark white on the walls.

"I don't care, I need to see a doctor now," I insisted.

"Well, your doctor is on holiday for Swiss National Day and won't return for another week," she said.

Not only had my prescription run out on Friday afternoon but my doctor's office was closed Saturday, Sunday, and Monday—and now he would be gone for an entire week. I honestly didn't think I'd survive that long.

"Please help me," I said, as I shuddered.

The receptionist had mercy. She instructed me to sit in the lobby so she could assess the situation.

After a few minutes a nurse invited me back to a part of the clinic I had never seen before. She ran the routine tests I'd grown accustomed to: check the pulse (always fast), take the temperature (always hot), prick the finger to test the blood (still infected). Nothing new.

What was new, however, was the profuse sweating, shaking, and elevated panic I was experiencing.

By that time she sensed something was very wrong. She asked me to wait a few more minutes so she could speak with the other doctor and bring him up to speed on my case.

I needed to lie down. I was seated on a metal table about the length of my body so I swiveled around, put my feet up, and lay back. It felt good to rest after walking all that way in the rain. However, by then I was shaking so violently that it was a fight to stay on the table. I barely managed not to fall off.

Finally the other doctor entered the room.

"Please sit up," he said with Swiss efficiency.

I obliged.

He pressed an icy stethoscope to my chest and listened. He moved it and listened some more, now with a concerned look on his face.

He pulled the earpieces from his ears, pushed his glasses back into place on the bridge of his nose, and glanced through my medical chart again. Then he paused.

Again with the stethoscope. This time he didn't move it at all; he just kept it positioned in the same place. After two minutes of listening, he pulled the earpieces out again and stepped back.

"We need to get you to the hospital right away," he said.

I immediately thought of our meager pay and limited insurance. "How much is that going to cost?"

He responded with something I'll never forget.

"You either go to the hospital or you die. You choose. Something is terribly wrong with your heart." I immediately thought of Selena.

SELENA

Ryan had been gone for over an hour, but I didn't think anything of it. Rain was pouring down, and I had just finished exercising one of the younger horses. Wet, muddy, and a bit frustrated from the past week's events, I was more than ready to get the horses put away and start their lunch so I could get my own and take a nap.

"Selena?" Dani called for me in the barn.

"Yes, in here," I hollered back while brushing down the fidgety young horse.

"We need to go to the hospital. A doctor called us. They said Ryan is sick and we need to go." The anxiety in his voice made my heart skip a beat.

"Okay, I'll be there in a sec . . ."

"We need to go now," Dani said more forcefully. "The other groom will finish here."

I left immediately with Dani—with stained breeches, muddy boots, a damp sweatshirt, and my wallet. Off we went to the local hospital.

I remember thinking, *I hope he's okay. I wonder why we all need to go down there. Maybe he's too tired to walk back and it's really rainy.* I had no idea what to expect.

Growing up with a mom who is a registered nurse showed me how to keep a level head when sickness or injury happened in our family. My worry level for Ryan's health was about a three on a scale of ten. Being the young wife and naïve twenty-three-year-old that I was, I figured Ryan and I would have plenty of time to chat and process the day's events back at our little apartment on the farm that evening (antibiotics in hand, of course).

After arriving at the hospital, Dani and I walked into the room where Ryan was sitting up in a bed. The doctor came in and explained that they were going to do an ultrasound of his heart (an echocardiogram) because they had heard a murmur during their examination.

The severity of the situation started to sink in after the technician gave us the results of the ultrasound. Ryan had a bacterial growth, approximately two centimeters long, attached to his mitral valve. Every time his heart beat, and the valve opened and closed, the growth would flap around like a flag. That was the murmur they heard.

"Okay, so how do we treat this?" I asked with fear in my voice. "What do we do?"

After the technician explained the ultrasound results, the doctor said that we needed to go now to the main hospital in Zürich via ambulance so the staff there could monitor Ryan. They had called to consult the head of cardiology at the state hospital in Zürich, and his orders were to get Ryan there as quickly as possible.