

We absolutely loved *The Fight for Us*. All-encompassing in topics, it constantly kept nudging us toward Jesus, and most of all, it feels like a marriage book written for the modern person facing all the difficulties of being a Christian and married today. The wisdom, humor, truth, and salience made this a book we couldn't put down. We'll be buying a boxful and handing them to any couple looking for an extra dose of help and encouragement.

**Jefferson and Alyssa Bethke**, *New York Times* bestselling authors; founders, Family Teams

The marriage of Gabe and Rebekah Lyons is a force for the kingdom, and *The Fight for Us* reflects their heart for God's design for marriage. Through their story, they've given us a guide to not just navigate conflict but to use it as a tool for deeper intimacy and partnership. Their faithfulness to each other and to Jesus shines brightly on every page.

**Jonathan "JP" and Monica Pokluda**, lead pastor, Harris Creek Church; author, *Your Story Has a Villain*; host, *Becoming Something* podcast

This is a rare marriage book. It's not just written; it's lived. In a world of head knowledge and research, we all want something that moves us beyond where we find ourselves. And we usually want to know there are people who have lived the hard, done the work, and come out on the other side more whole and joyful because of it. Gabe and Rebekah Lyons are that couple. This book will draw you in. You'll find yourself saying, "That's us too!" And you'll receive practical tools to be a better "us" for each other.

**Josh and Christi Straub**, cofounders, Famous at Home

Accessible. Hopeful. Practical. Vulnerable. Compelling. Gabe and Rebekah Lyons have written a direly needed, profoundly helpful "us" book that neither of you is going to want to put down, as every chapter opens up your marriage to a level of connection and intimacy you've always hoped for. This is more than a mere book; it is a marriage lifeline—for genuine thriving.

**Ann and Darryl Voskamp**, *New York Times* bestselling author; farmer

Marriage, by its very design, *happens to us*. Our work, much like our navigating on the ocean in a two-person kayak, is not merely to use it to get us to where we want to go, but also to train us to become seasoned mariners. In *The Fight for Us*, Gabe and Rebekah Lyons provide a map and compass to inspire and encourage with vulnerable instruction. You'll imagine and discover a flourishing marriage, even in the face of odds that seem difficult to overcome.

**Curt Thompson**, MD, author, *The Soul of Desire* and *The Deepest Place*

# THE FIGHT FOR US

## Also by Rebekah Lyons

*Freefall to Fly*

*You Are Free*

*Rhythms of Renewal*

*Rhythms for Life Planner and Journal*

*A Surrendered Yes*

*Building a Resilient Life*

*Resilient Life Journal and Planner*

## Also by Gabe Lyons

*unChristian* (coauthored with David Kinnaman)

*The Next Christians*

*Good Faith* (coauthored with David Kinnaman)

# THE FIGHT FOR US

OVERCOME WHAT DIVIDES  
TO BUILD A MARRIAGE  
THAT THRIVES

REBEKAH LYONS & GABE LYONS

 ZONDERVAN  
BOOKS

ZONDERVAN BOOKS

*The Fight for Us*

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*To our faithful parents,  
Melvin and Darlene Lyons and Howard and Nila DeWeese.  
You fought for your marriages for more than fifty years,  
inspiring us to fight for ours.  
We are eternally grateful.*

*Summing up: Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that's your job, to bless. You'll be a blessing and also get a blessing.*

**1 PETER 3:8-9 MSG**

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# TWENTY- FIVE YEARS



*Marriage breaks us and remakes us, and out of wreckage can  
come resurrection.*

ANN VOSKAMP

**“I take you to be my husband,** to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part, according to God’s holy law. In the presence of God, I make this vow.”

It had been a struggle, but we’d done it. For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, Gabe and I had loved and cherished each other, and we’d made it to the quarter-century milestone. Some years we crawled, some years we danced, every year we argued. And yet here we were, thrilled and grateful that throughout the highs and lows and in-betweens, God in his mercy held us together. Now it was time to celebrate!

For a couple years, we’d been planning our twenty-fifth anniversary trip to Scotland, the origin of the Lyons family heritage. We saved airline miles and booked flights and hotels. We would begin in Edinburgh, make our way through the countryside, and end in St. Andrews, widely regarded as the birthplace of golf. Gabe and I love to golf, and this felt like a dream. We were going to travel in late September, the most hectic season of work travel, but an ideal time for lining up childcare. We wanted Cade and Joy, our two children with Down syndrome, to have the structure of school to make the time go quicker so they wouldn’t miss us so much. Beyond that, I didn’t have a second to think further about the trip until I began packing.

The weekend prior to our departure, I buzzed around the house in a frenzy, my usual mode before leaving the kids—stocking the fridge with simple meals and stocking their drawers with clean laundry. September is also when the summer garden goes wild and requires constant pruning and harvesting. So that Saturday I headed into the garden and soon got carried away. After picking tomatoes, peppers, squash, pole beans, and cucumbers, I walked around to the back of the house and noticed several unfamiliar weeds. I pulled those out quickly before heading back inside.

Two days later, upon boarding our flight from JFK in New York City to Edinburgh for an eight-hour red-eye, I noticed that the red scratch on my left forearm had begun to bubble and burn. Initially, I ignored it, but now on the plane I was miserable. The scratch burned and itched for the next several hours. Things escalated so quickly that by the time we landed, Gabe had scheduled a tele-health appointment through our hotel concierge to get the rash under control. The UK doctor prescribed three different types of oral and topical steroids, which I quickly applied. Relieved, we set out to enjoy our first day exploring Edinburgh Castle—a place Gabe's family lore suggests was maintained by one of his ancestors in the fifteenth century.

The next day, as we made our way through several old towns and walked beside the sea and castles, I noticed the rash on my forearm was worsening, spreading across my abdomen and to my other arm. I kept taking the steroids, to no avail. By the time we arrived in St. Andrews, I was in so much pain I couldn't golf, and I lay in the room as the rash overtook my legs. As I slathered my entire body with ointment, I noticed Gabe gently rolling up my lingerie that was hanging in our hotel closet. We both had hopeful intentions at each new destination, but at this point we'd finally given up.

By day five, the rash seemed to be spreading even further, and I feared I might have shingles. I even had welts on my scalp and winced every time the wind blew through my hair. I lay on our hotel bed, skin burning, tears falling. But it wasn't just the pain. There was shame and sorrow too. This was our twenty-fifth anniversary, and we were on the kind of getaway that doesn't happen often. It was supposed to be a time to celebrate and connect emotionally and physically, but it was the most nonsexy trip of our entire marriage. Or so I thought.

Gabe saw it differently.

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Anytime we plan a trip together, I (Gabe) am the one who tackles the logistics. I love figuring out which flights and trains to take and enjoy gaining as much local knowledge as possible to ensure we'd hit every experience with no regrets. For our anniversary trip, I was equally excited about the romance logistics. I researched where to have dinner, the comforts offered by various hotels, including whether there was a bathtub and what the view was from our room. I carefully planned our itinerary so we'd have enough time to pause and enjoy just being together. Of course, the hope that we'd make love multiple times is always part of the equation!

In the five years leading up to our anniversary, Rebekah and I doubled down on our commitment to each other. We asked God to keep us humble, help us stay curious about each other's needs, and motivate us to always pursue reconciliation. This united decision bolstered our spiritual and emotional health, and it was making a positive impact in our marriage. We were closer and

more connected. We were more open, more honest. Rebekah was encouraged. I was encouraged. We both felt seen and known.

And yet because we're human and need God's continued healing in our lives, there seemed to be a few nagging issues that popped up and surprised us every few weeks. For starters, I don't feel comfortable sharing my deepest needs, fearing they may be minimized. I get defensive and overreact to minor disagreements when caught off guard. I desire sex more frequently than Rebekah and sometimes feel rejected when she doesn't.

For her part, Rebekah has told me she stops trying to connect emotionally if I'm not fully present. She can default to the silent treatment for self-protection when she feels hurt. And when there is a distance or misunderstanding between us, she's not motivated to make love.

For all the progress we were making, we still found ourselves susceptible to old defensive patterns. When we felt hurt or misunderstood, we were tempted to replay old narratives about each other, even when we knew they weren't true.

Thankfully, we were now better equipped when temptation came knocking. We had both done the work. Years of honest conversations with wise mentors had helped us navigate the most difficult terrain together. When our issues arose, we could pause and regroup, armed with the tools and patience we needed to push through.

While some of this seemed more intuitive for Rebekah, it was hard work for me. We invested time together with Christian counselors and experienced breakthrough in many areas. We started to

understand each other in new ways. We gained insight into the ways our origin stories contributed to the distance we sometimes felt in our relationship. We discovered how distraction had become a coping mechanism to avoid our deeper feelings. And together we offered each other forgiveness for the deeper resentments we had carried since the earliest years of our marriage.

Our twenty-fifth anniversary trip was perfectly timed. With both of us experiencing growth, I felt confident that the new language and deeper understanding we had gained would help us feel the most emotionally connected we'd ever been on a trip. And I knew what follows emotional connection—physical connection!

But the latter part of that vision came crashing down on day two of our trip to Scotland. With Rebekah's poison ivy rash raging, my hopes took a detour. But that detour led us to a deeper place—the place we needed to go.

As a man who thought sex was the gateway to connection, I didn't know another way to find intimacy. In our first decade of marriage, I gave only blank stares whenever Rebekah talked about not feeling connected. However, in recent years, I'd begun to make sense of how I, from the age of eleven, had protected my heart after I suffered my deepest trauma. (I'll share more about that in chapter 5.) I'd put boundaries around my heart since that moment, vowing never to allow anyone close enough to do that kind of damage again.

With sex no longer an option on our anniversary trip, our conversations went deeper than they ever had. Our journey toward intimacy and taking responsibility for the many ways each of us had failed the other paved the way for healing. We would never

have planned it this way, but what we experienced together because of it was nothing short of a breakthrough.

At any other time in our marriage, the derailment of our hopes and plans for this trip might have spelled certain disaster, especially for me. My expectations to further solidify our love and intimacy would have been paramount for the success of our trip. And yet this time it wasn't a disaster. Instead, I sensed something new taking place.

Sure, there was disappointment. Who wants to spend an anniversary trip in Europe without touching your spouse, seeing her draped only in loose clothing and taking ointment baths before bed? But the investments we had been making prior to that trip—to reset our covenant commitment, repent of the resentments we carried, learn about each other at the deepest levels, grow individually through reflection and practice, seek each other out, and do the heart work to resolve our pattern of arm's-length emotional engagement—were bearing fruit.

We had finally discovered how  
to win in the fight for us.

That trip marked a seminal moment in reestablishing our marriage. It allowed us to reorient our commitment to each other, even when physical intimacy wasn't a possibility. It was a high mark, a holy time of recognition, commitment, celebration, and renewal. We had overcome the temptation in every marriage since the beginning of time—to find fault with each other, create division, and make the other the enemy. We had finally discovered how to win in the fight for us.



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CHAPTER ONE

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# GETTING BACK TO US



## An Invitation to Dream Again

*To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.*

TIMOTHY KELLER

## *Us* is a powerful force.

It was always meant to be that way. Two people becoming one, a concept only a triune God could conceive. From the Garden of Eden, when God said man should not be alone, I (Rebekah) believe he envisioned a powerful *us*. Not a lone individual trying to carve their way through life, but a tour de force couple in covenant—a forever *us* committed until death. This was God’s ultimate standard for humanity.

Research tends to agree. According to Brad Wilcox, author of *Get Married* and director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, “Social science tells us that your marital status—whether you are married or not—is a crucial predictor of a whole host of important economic, emotional and health outcomes for men and women throughout their adult lives. . . . Specifically, the odds that men and women say they are ‘very happy’ with their lives are a staggering 545 percent higher for those who are very happily married, compared to their peers who are not married or who are less than very happy in their marriages.”<sup>1</sup>

When I (Rebekah) first imagined being married, it was a blissful picture. I didn’t envision picnics and bouquets of peonies every day, but my idyllic view of a husband mesmerized by my intelligence and beauty, longing to be with me, was part of the equation. When I married Gabe, it didn’t take me long to realize

that marriage wasn't only about me. Gabe came into our marriage with quite a different vision. He desired a wife by his side, celebrating his accomplishments, admiring his intellect, and ready to have sex at a moment's notice.

Needless to say, we've both experienced disappointments.

Marriage is a magnificent idea, but it's full of trouble.

Mysterious and maddening.

Thrilling and threatening.

Sensual and sad.

Compelling and convicting.

If you are like us, you know the patterns and all the feelings.

Yet we continue forward.

We struggle.

We love.

We reject.

We listen.

We fail.

We repent.

We are sad.

We apologize.

We try again.

We are lonely.

We betray.

We forgive.

We overcome.

We are ashamed.

We make love.

We make war.

We are unkind.

We hurt.

We are confused.

In the final evaluation, all of us long for something more. We know there's the potential for deeper connection, for more joy-filled encounters. But the hurt of unmet expectations is real. The pain comes in spurts, and it builds up over time. And the deceiving enemy is always there to offer a bit of self-pity to satiate our pain: *Maybe you married the wrong person.*

## “IT’S NOT ME; IT’S YOU”

It was the worst breakup line, but that didn’t stop me (Gabe) from using it. The goal was to soften the blow, make the news less hurtful, and do no further harm. It was a simple phrase we’ve all used to end a relationship: “It’s not you; it’s me.” Thankfully, I never used that line on Rebekah.

Rebekah and I had an instant connection from the first time we met. From all-night phone conversations and dance parties with friends to revealing our deepest longings and enjoying our shared physical attraction, we felt like a perfect match. Our early days of romance were strong and steady. I’d met my soulmate and life was good. *What could possibly go wrong?*

But once we were married, the moments of disconnection were all too common. Rebekah seemed perpetually upset about something. I could do nothing right. We fought over the dumbest subjects, bickering over responsibilities, falling woefully short of expectations in the kitchen, the living room, *and* the bedroom. The hurt built up—always a silent killer.

It was all very disorienting, and I had to make sense of it. How did we go from an exciting honeymoon to this dreadful daily grind? I needed an answer. And Rebekah became the target.

I fell into the trap—the one set for us every day. It’s the perfect way to remain a victim and enjoy the misery that comes with it. It’s the reverse of the breakup line I used to use, and it brought the same kind of relief: “It’s not me; it’s you.”

For those first years of our marriage, I assumed I was the one who

had it all together. If something was off in the relationship, it certainly wasn't my fault. I grew up in a stable home; my parents loved Jesus and raised me to be a man of my word. I was an all-around great guy—at least, that's what my friends and colleagues told me.

## THE BLAME GAME

Blame is the name of this game. But if we are ever going to grow into the love we crave, the game ends here.

If you are playing the blame game, you are like hundreds of couples we have counseled over the years. When things are going wrong, we all do it. We are quick to find fault with the other. It's the simplest way to relieve the stress, shift our anxiety, and free us from the burden of being the problem. After all, how could it possibly be us? Our culture doesn't often point us in this direction. In an age of individualism, algorithms, and perfectly curated social media feeds, everything is about elevating the individual. So we stare into mirrors, trying to cover every imperfection. Yet the blemishes of our hearts go untouched, and we live this way year after year.

The blame grows daily, reinforced by our mental tally of how our spouse keeps failing us—the clothes he leaves on the floor, the dishes he lets sit in the sink, the lingerie she's not wearing when I return home from a long trip, her loveless face as she abruptly walks out with the extra punch felt from the slam of the door. All these seemingly small encounters start to pile up and leave us feeling the strain of our relationship going south.

Creating lasting change in marriage  
requires us to stop blaming our  
spouse and start taking ownership.

Our instinct is to blame rather than reflect on our own role in the breakdown of our marriage. But creating lasting change in marriage requires us to stop blaming our spouse and start taking ownership. Fighting for our marriage requires focusing on the only person we can control—ourselves. The blame game ends when we finally have the courage to ask, “What if the problem *is me?*”

## JUST LIKE YOU

Rebekah and I aren’t your ordinary marriage experts. We don’t have PhDs, and we aren’t licensed therapists. But we’ve experienced God’s healing power, studied the research, analyzed the data, and counseled hundreds of couples to back away from the ledge through the marriage intensives and retreats we offer. Based on what we’ve learned through these experiences and in partnership with marriage and family experts, we’ve developed a process for healing that has helped countless people—and through the pages of this book, we believe it can help you too.

Our journey certainly hasn’t been typical.

From the birth of our first child, Cade, born with Down syndrome, our lives were hurled into a learning curve we could never have predicted. We also took risks, including moving to major metropolitan areas and later to rural country settings. We even adopted a child with special needs ten years after Cade was born. Over the years, we’ve managed dual careers, launched adult children, and forged a fortified faith—all while working our way through our own broken relationship.

Here’s the thing. We never could do it alone. And neither can you.

Fortunately, we were smart enough to recognize that we didn't know what we didn't know. We needed mentors and other couples to help us navigate the tumultuous and unprecedented moments of life. When we couldn't afford professional counseling, we read books and consumed wisdom from every couple who had gone a few steps further than us. From our church newlyweds class and marriage mentors over the next two decades, to deep intensives and couples tune-ups with world-class experts, we've been blessed to experience an abundance of encouragement, advice, and direction that has helped us along the way. We've had people fight for us in the same way we want to fight for you.

Our journey inspired us to dig in and to keep growing. In recent years, we went through extensive training to become board-certified by the American Association of Christian Counselors as mental health coaches with a specialty in marriage and family. This experience sharpened our lenses on the unique challenges of modern marriage and the pitfalls we are all susceptible to. Through it all, we've learned how to love and how to live, but, most importantly for you, we've discovered how to create safe spaces for others to do the same. That's what *The Fight for Us* is meant to do for you.

## HARD AND HOPEFUL

For more than twenty years, Rebekah and I have hosted retreats for couples trying to navigate the crushing labyrinth of marriage, kids, careers, faith, and mission. Many of our gatherings begin with a vulnerable moment. From our stools at the front of the room, we pose a simple question: "What one word describes what is hard, and what one word captures the hope you desire?" With only seconds to reflect, each spouse then stands, takes a breath,

and shares their response. The responses are all different, yet they all share a similar tune:

My hard word is *pain*. My hopeful word is *longing*.  
My hard word is *betrayal*. My hopeful word is *trust*.  
My hard is *trauma*. My hope is for *healing*.  
I'm *exhausted*. I'm hoping for *rest*.  
My hard is *burdened*. I hope for *relief*.  
I'm *addicted*. I long to be *free*.  
I feel *lonely*. I hope for *connection*.

These couples are just like you. We are all on a journey to redeem pain and find purpose. We fight because we haven't been all that good at discovering what's going on underneath. We long to be known, to be free, to live abundant lives, but we fall woefully short.

We are all on a journey to  
redeem pain and find purpose.

If this is you, know that you are not alone. This is not the end of your story.

It might be hard to believe, but your spouse carries these same burdens. Maybe they don't express them the same way you do. Perhaps they give you the silent treatment or put up emotional walls as thick as the Great Wall of China—and you have no possible way to break through. You may not think they feel anything, but they do.

Let's be honest. Most of us are just trying to survive day to day. We had visions of a marriage that was joyful, stress-free, and fun. But somewhere around year one, five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five,

or thirty—in other words, every year, especially in the shifting of seasons—we feel like we haven't quite hit our stride. We hope we will one day get there, but we can't yet see the forest for the trees. We are tired of the fight. But it's a trap as old as time.

Let us tell you something about that burden you are carrying today. It's not forever. It's for a season. You have relational pain, but that pain is evidence of a deeper longing. God wants to satisfy that longing *through* your relationship, not outside of it.

At nearly thirty years of marriage, Rebekah and I can look back and see the trauma we've experienced in unexpected circumstances and unmet expectations—in sex, intimacy, career, friendships, parenting, faith, finances, and purpose. Our broken hearts grew hard; our hopes and dreams of better days were dashed with the latest argument. Both frustrated and misunderstood, we've suffered the guilt of knowing that how things ought to be is incongruent with how things are. We know the feeling of failure can be almost too much to bear.

That's when we knew we'd have to fight.

Instead of fighting with each other, though, we had to fight for *us*.

## INTRODUCING CONVERSATIONS FOR COUPLES

Each chapter in *The Fight for Us* concludes with questions to help you and your spouse have conversations about what you've read. You can find additional in-depth questions in *The Journal for Us*.

Here are some guidelines for these conversations:

- Meet in a place where you won't be interrupted or distracted. Turn off and put away phones and other electronic devices. They should not be visible or within reach.
- Allow a spacious amount of time (twenty to thirty minutes). Begin with a moment of silence to calm your mind. Close your eyes and take a deep breath in and let it out slowly.
- As you talk through the questions, give your spouse your undivided attention.
- When your spouse is speaking, seek first to understand (by asking follow-up questions) rather than to be understood (by mentally preparing your response). Do not interrupt while your spouse is speaking.
- When you are speaking, try to make "I" statements rather than "you" statements. "I" statements focus on your feelings and needs. "You" statements focus on assumptions or judgments about your spouse's thoughts, actions, or character (for example, "I feel anxious when you aren't home on time," rather than, "You never text me when you're running late.")
- Decide how you will conclude your conversations (such as with another moment of silence, a prayer, or an expression of love for each other). Set a date for your next conversation.



## CONVERSATIONS FOR COUPLES

1. Everyone comes to marriage with hopes and expectations. When you first imagined being married, what expectations did you have of your spouse and of your life together? In what ways did your expectations differ from the other person's? In what ways have you experienced disappointment?
2. Our instinct is to blame rather than reflect on our own role in a conflict. What aspects of your marriage tend to prompt an "It's not me, it's you" mindset in this season of your relationship? What thoughts or emotions are you aware of when you consider the question, "What if the problem *is* me?"
3. What one word describes what is hard in your marriage? What one word captures what you hope for in your marriage?

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PART ONE

---

# UNDERSTAND WHAT DIVIDES





**Every marriage experiences conflicts** that threaten to divide what God has joined together. But understanding *why we fight, how we fight, and what we fight about* can give us deep insights into who we are—as individuals and as a couple. It can shine a light on our traumas and wounds, and that light directs us to the place we need God most—to the place where we need healing.

Conflict is never comfortable. But if we're going to fight for each other and our marriage, we have to deal with conflict head-on. We must explore the areas of pain and disunity in our marriage and invite God into those places.

Are you ready to explore the areas of conflict in your marriage?  
Are you willing to invite God into those spaces so you can step out of your dysfunctional dance and into healing?

Please join us. We promise it will be worth it.

