

WAR STORY, PART 2 (STEVEN AND BROOKE ELLIOTT)

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Ryan: In April 2004, Army Ranger Steven Elliott was deployed with the 2nd Ranger Battalion to Afghanistan. The objective of operation "Mountain Storm" was to kill or capture Osama Bin Laden. On April 22, Steven's squad was attacked by enemy combatants which resulted in 4 casualties, one of whom was former NFL safety, Pat Tillman.

Steven: It was told very plainly by all of us what happened, and it was concluded very clearly that it was friendly fire. That was the first time that the possibility that maybe I had fired on Pat and maybe hit him in what was practically darkness had occurred. That's when, for me, the real survivor's guilt started kicking in. That's when the posttraumatic stress really started kicking in. That's when the nightmare started kicking in. That's when I started self-medicating with alcohol.

It was the point when you're pulling a handgun out of your gun safe at home and just thinking about the fact that this could all be over really easily. Not because I didn't have things I wanted to look for but because I didn't know how to rest. I didn't know how to make it stop.

A lot of questions. A lot of questions like, "Why? Why did that happen? Why me? Whose fault is it? Is it my fault? Am I solely to blame? Is the chain of command's fault? Are they to blame? Are we both to blame? How do I deal with the guilt that I feel for having done what I've done? How do I deal with the shame that I feel for not just having done something potentially harmful? Am I the thing that I did?" We all have the same need to answer the same question of who am I? And why am I here? And in being here, what do I do with the fact that I hurt people, sometimes unintentionally, sometimes on purpose, and they hurt me? What do I do with that?

Ryan: This is part two of a conversation we had with our good friends Steven and Brooke Elliott. Theirs is a story of tragedy, depression, heartache, grace, and redemption. It's our prayer that by hearing their story you can marvel with us at the goodness of God to repair and restore lives, even when all hope seems lost.

Brooke: There is many nights, most nights I should say, where he was on the computer, and many nights where he was drinking and I knew that he was not telling me the whole story with that. So for then to connect in those early years

I felt was really, really important. And it wasn't happening. And so it was like a constant source of pain for me. It just really, really broke my heart.

Selena: How long did this go on with you sort of battling alone, it sounds like? And what did that lead to in your guys' relationship? Share with the listeners. We know your journey but obviously, we want to hear.

Steven: So that was 2000. I got out in May of 2007. And then for the next really two years, basically, not quite two years was kind of the final leg down in our first marriage.

Brooke: It was almost exactly two years.

Steven: Almost exactly two years.

Selena: Wow.

Steven: Because I got out in '07, was a financial advisor with a large firm and turns out there's a financial crisis 2008.

Brooke: Yeah, that was really real.

Selena: It just add to everything, right?

Steven: Yeah. What that meant then it was another, again-

Selena: Another external-

Steven: It was the army, but now it's "Oh, I got a new job, and I got to pass my securities exams, otherwise, I'm not going to have a job." It's like, "Well, I passed my securities exams. Now I gotta build my client base. Now, I gotta keep my client base." There's always something. Brooke would continuously and politely but directly just like, "Is that okay drinking every night?" Or "Maybe you could talk to somebody." That was a consistent theme.

Brooke: And it would almost never be an argument. He would agree with me, but then nothing would change.

Selena: Gotcha

Brooke: So it was two years-

Selena: So I imagine some bitterness and resentment would start building.

Brooke: Yeah. And just hopelessness honestly because I begged him to go to counseling, and then I begged him to go to counseling with me. We would have a conversation, and he would be like, "Yes, I totally understand." And maybe it was just to get me off his back at that time.

Selena: Just a high functioning. He's like, "Okay, yeah, we'll do this." Like an appeasement really and not really-

Steven: Well, number one, you're stuck in your own inertia. You're stuck in your own sort of pattern of behavior, where it's just like, "Yeah, I should go workout." As you're like stuffed in three fistfuls potato chips in your mouth and you're like-

Selena: Amen.

Ryan: I'm currently there.

Steven: Part of it's just muscle memory. Like, how do I stop and actually do that? And then part of it was just fear. Part of it was I was afraid that if I actually... going to see someone makes the wound, whatever that is, more real. So it's this perverse logic where if I don't see the doctor, there's nothing wrong. And then there's also the what happens if we go down that road, which doesn't sound particularly fun? What happens if we go down that road and doesn't change anything? Then I really am hopeless. At least now, I have this weird hope of treatment, yet to be applied.

Selena: The false sense of security.

Steven: It's just like, well, out there it gets really bad. But I'm handling it. Because it partly in my mind, when I would think of new way that I was conditioned to think of... I guess I had no visual context for, quote-unquote, mental illness or [inaudible] other than the guy who's on the street corner wearing the surplus jacket begging for change.

So I had a very binary view where it's like either you're part of functioning society. And by the way, what do you have to feel sorry about? There's a guy in your platoon, who you blew his knee out because of your weapon, and your choice to fire and maybe another guy that you maybe killed, and you came on with all your fingers and toes. So count your blessings. You don't get to feel sorry for yourself. You have this Good job, you have a family, you have all these things, that basically you use that and it's a filter of guilt and a filter of shame, where you don't deserve to even be wounded. But then you don't have the picture in your mind of if I admit to that, and if I raise my hand, then I'm at risk of falling off the wagon of society. You know what I mean?

- Selena:** Yeah. Yeah.
- Steven:** Then I'm in this class of "and that's not me. I'm a strong..."
- Brooke:** All the stigma.
- Steven:** A lot of stigma. The crazy thing about it is I was in a job and in a community. I had all the privacy in the world, I had all the resources in the world, I had all the time. If anybody would have had the ability to carve out an hour a week in their schedule and pay for it themselves and do it and talk to somebody, it was me. So I wasn't working to swing shifts, trying to make ends meet. So it was purely my own fear, my own ego, my own ignorance that kept me from seeking help. And then ultimately, it got to a point where Brooke was just done.
- Brooke:** It was like the door to my heart was closed.
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Brooke:** And there was just no opening it. Because at that time when I basically said, "Okay, I'm done now. We need to figure out what's next," he was like, "Oh, wait, okay, I'll go to counseling."
- Selena:** Sure. Sure.
- Brooke:** And then I think we went to one session together, which just felt like a big joke, she was like, "Well, you guys are really good at communicating. I'm not used to this."
- Ryan:** "Why are you here?"
- Brooke:** It was funny. That's all we did for two years and eight months. So, yeah, we are pretty good at communicating.
- Selena:** Right.
- Ryan:** I mean, to hear you say that reminds me of even in communication we can still be obscure to each other.
- Brooke:** Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.
- Ryan:** There's an author. I'm forgetting his name right now, but he calls it meaningful risk. Andy Crouch. In his book... I forget what it's called. "Strong and the

Weak." He talks about meaningful risk where like we can talk to someone else and be functioning but not truly opening yourself up to the sense that you can tell me and I can take your feedback, internalize it and let it bear weight in my heart and in my soul. So you can be skilled communicators and just run it off to a course all day long but you never actually let it penetrate your heart. And here you are, you end up two years after playing this game, and you as a wife, Brooke, you're saying, "I'm done. This feels like a lie, basically."

Brooke: Yeah, it does. It feels like we're roommates. Not very good ones really.

Ryan: So go from there. Your heart door had been shut. What happens next?

Brooke: So, gosh, there's like a few other things.

Selena: Were you guys married for two years at this point?

Steven: We've been married for four.

Selena: Four. Because you were two apart and then two together.

Steven: Yeah.

Ryan: Two years since you got home.

Steven: That's right.

Brooke: [inaudible] the end of August.

Ryan: At what point did you actually say, "Here's the divorce papers?"

Steven: We were getting not great. I mean, I was getting no advice because I didn't let anybody in. That was also part of the MO, even with Brooke, part of the logic of "Well, I don't want to tell her about stuff because I'm protecting her from my pain." Well, those two things aren't mutually exclusive. You don't have to ask your wife to perform surgery on you. But that doesn't mean you don't go see somebody who does that or find an outlet in order to try and start addressing that.

But it went from, "Well, we're roommates, I'll sleep in the den, maybe we just need some extra separation in the house for that to help." Just turns out that doesn't help.

Brooke: That was bad advice.

- Steven:** That was bad advice.
- Brooke:** That was bad advice.
- Steven:** And then it was, "Well, let's kind of call a spade a spade. Maybe I'll just move out." And so I moved out in spring of '09. Moved in with a couple of guys who were... single guys had a room for rent and a house. They were both working professionals. It was a good setup. And then it was just like, well, neither of us are particularly comfortable sitting in ambiguity. Were both pretty much just like, "If this is what it is, then let's rip the band aid off." So then it wasn't too long after I moved out to where we started the divorce proceedings. Summer of 2009, I believe.
- Selena:** Wow.
- Ryan:** Wow. So at this point, fast forward maybe a few months after the divorce proceedings, and that's all made official at some point. Now you're living separate lives, Steven, still dealing with these issues, I presume. Right?
- Steven:** Yeah. That's what it took for me to sort of be jarred enough to feel like you're an adult. I've got a house and a mortgage, and a wife, and a kid and a job. And then now I'm drinking Keystone, playing Mario Kart with my two roommates, which is fun, and still doing my big grown-up job.
- Ryan:** I'm disappointed in your beer choice. But-
- Steven:** We had to get through some stuff, to clear that up before we can... I hadn't hit my IPA phase yet. I was developing.
- Ryan:** It's a long phase.
- Steven:** It's a long phase. I just remember kind of sitting there and like, "I used to have these things and then now I don't." And it's like, "What happened?" And that was kind of the first point where I was sort of like, "Oh, maybe I'm the common denominator in this equation." And some of it was just, frankly, us being apart was helpful to some degree, because I was able to, practically speaking, just take care of myself for a while. Because you'd get home and oftentimes I just felt like a failure because I knew that I was emotionally neglecting Brooke and Gracie. I was good at mowing the yard and I was good at doing chores or whatever, but I was not there for them. So at least not living together was helpful in some regards, because I wasn't letting anybody else down. I had a cat and he didn't seem to care one way or the other.
- Ryan:** So you're a human version of the cat.

- Steven:** Sort of. A wounded feral barn cat that doesn't want to be seen until he's whole, frankly. I mean, that's what really it was.
- Brooke:** That hasn't bathed in a while.
- Selena:** That hasn't bathed in a while.
- Steven:** That and potato chips. So I started seeing somebody. During that time, I started turning back to Lord. There was stuff that was happening for me where my heart was being drawn back towards Him.
- Ryan:** You started seeing somebody. Are seeing a counselor or...?
- Steven:** A counselor, yeah.
- Selena:** Good clarification.
- Steven:** Yeah, thank you.
- Brooke:** I started actually seeing somebody. Because how else do you medicate yourself after divorce? You start dating.
- Steven:** What was his name?
- Brooke:** Steve.
- Ryan:** I love how you say that.
- Selena:** You can't get away from it.
- Ryan:** That was a fun one. Wow.
- Steven:** So I started having language for what I was going through, started doing some treatment called EMDR, which is just one of a variety of modalities for trauma. They didn't fix me by any stretch, but it definitely started taking some of the edge off. And then it was during that time that I was making a lot of the positive choices that Brooke had been asking me to make for a very long time. And then she was having her own experience during that timeframe of our... Basically, we were just waiting for the divorce to be final.
- Ryan:** So what was that like for you at that point? So you're having your own experience kind of realizing, okay, this is coming to grips with the fact that that

marriage, that chapter of life is behind me. Because I know there's a point where you guys kind of meet again. Right?

Steven: Yeah.

Ryan: So up into that point, what what's the life of Brooke like. There's something for the wife that might be listening to this who's not necessarily in that point of separation themselves, but feeling like maybe that's the only way forward. Maybe shed some light on that, and maybe how that could be a lie, or maybe how that could be... Where's the gospel in all that? I just would love to hear from you.

Brooke: Well, that lie that we tell ourselves that "when this is over, meaning our marriage, I'm going to feel a lot better. Things are going to get a lot easier." So, for me, I wasn't I really did start pursuing a relationship with God. I wasn't mad at Him necessarily. It was more just, I guess, indifference. And started seeking outside myself for things to fill the void. So I was going out...

I had become a mom at 22. I was really young. And then shortly after that, I got married. And so I did feel like I didn't get to have that youthful fun, because that's going to make me happy was what I was thinking. So that's what I did for a number of months until I remember sitting at this bar in Seattle, and I was just like, "I hate this. This is so empty." It just hit me just right over the head and I went home. That was kind of the end of that, you know, doing the partying thing, and really that sort of seeking and searching.

And it was very shortly after that that Steven and I had chatted over the phone, because we had maintained contact. We felt like it was really important to not just completely sever the relationship for Gracie's sake. Over that summer, I think we'd have like a handful or less dinners together. And he was still helping us with the finances. Like we stayed in the house, I was still in school. I didn't have a way to support Gracie and I quite yet.

I called him over some silly bill or something, I don't even remember, and I just started crying. And I was like, "Why did you change everything after I left?" Because he started seeing a counselor, he made friends, he started playing soccer again. These were all things that I begged him to do when we were together. Oh, he actually started eating well. He used to always make fun of me. You know, "Organic [inaudible]."

Ryan: Nothing but wheatgrass.

Steven: That's right. That's right. Steady diet than kale chips. No, Brooke is an excellent cook. And she was actually going to school to be a nutrition counselor. So in

some of this stuff, it wasn't just like, "You need an extra three milligrams of beta carotene." It was just like, I don't know, beer and potato chips and chips and salsa is that going to be your dinner. You're going to wake up and you're going to have coffee and Danish. It was super 30,000-foot view. Like, do yourself and then do us a favor and just take care of yourself. And I wasn't.

Ryan: So you guys had gone crazy journey and now you're functionally separated and legally separated.

Brooke: Eventually.

Ryan: But God is kind of renewing your affections for Him, I guess your knowledge of needing Him and knowledge of Him. Steven, there's a story that you told on the other podcast I mentioned. You're hiking in Mount Rainier.

Steven: Yes.

Ryan: Was that the turning point for you? What happened? And what was that? And where does that sit in your story of the two of you?

Steven: I would consider that kind of the apex of my own spiritual wandering. I had gone to church a few times and that was kind of getting... I didn't care about Sunday service. I just wanted to be somewhere where somebody was preaching the gospel. I just needed that in my soul. We were separated and it was unusual for me to actually feel like... That's part of the depression. Even things that you would want to do, you just feel like you don't care. It's like a wait right now.

So it was a 4th of July weekend and I actually was excited with the prospect of "Oh, wow. I think I want to go on a hike. And that was unusual and kind of exciting. It was just like, "Oh, okay." I charted out a loop on the Carbon Glacier of Mount Rainier. I went on that hike, didn't bother to tell anybody that I was going on that hike.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: It was one of those years where we had had an unusual amount of snow. In fact, I think just the year prior or so, that whole road along Carbon River had flooded dramatically.

Ryan: I remember that.

Steven: Yeah, yeah, exactly. It didn't happen that year. I think it was not long before that.

Ryan: But that event was catastrophic.

Steven: Yeah, it was. Anyway, I was hiking and there's various times the upshot of the snow line was much lower than it should in July. So at numerous points in the trail where I should have turned back, because that's what you do when you get significant snow on trail is you just stop and you turn around. I said, "No, this is the loop that I decided to do. And this is what's right and accomplishment looks like for today." And so I'm going to do that."

I kept going and eventually found myself in some of the most beautiful territory in the subalpine, just dancing around the Carbon River Glacier. And it was gorgeous and I had no idea where I was.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: Eventually, that starts to dawn on you that you have a fleece in that Clif bar, and you're a long way from your car.

Ryan: And it's legit wilderness. You're not just-

Steven: And no one knows where you are. And you keep going. And you keep going, and you're walking along ice fields and it's beautiful, and it's gorgeous and that's terrifying and it's exhilarating all at the same time. But you feel like with each step to return. Like with every step that you've taken, it's hard to turn around to step back. Because it's just like, "Well, then what was the last four hours of walking out here if I'm not going to finish?" I'm just going to have to go back and then look like even more of an idiot to some park ranger to get a ride back to my car, versus when I should have asked for that... I shouldn't..." You know what I mean?

Selena: Mm hmm.

Steven: It's like being on the trail that you shouldn't be on makes it more likely that you'll stay on the trail, because it's hard to get off of it anyway. So I hold up to a tree that night, and I was ill-prepared for all of that and I was just waiting for daylight. Just kind of had the self-talk loop going. Just not letting doubt or fear or any of that stuff kind of... It's just like, "Nope, I'm going to finish and this is what I'm doing." Generally speaking, I knew where I was, I just didn't know what trail was.

Ryan: Says every person has ever died in the wilderness.

Steven: Correct. So I'm just sitting there next to a tree shivering. I don't really know how to describe it but it was just like I got just hitting the forehead with kind of cosmic two by four. It was a voice that was not it... If somebody would say, "was it an auditory voice of God or not? I would say yes. I don't know. It just was. I don't know how to describe it. But it was just the word and the command, and frankly, the invitation STOP. It was my entire being just was jolted to a halt. It was rebuking and it was loving all at the same time. And I wept and I felt just that embrace.

After that, I just sat there just like, "What am I doing here?" And then laughing at myself that it's not like I just woke up after being kidnapped by the drug cartel and they dumped me off some mountain. I'm here shivering in the middle of the night with no food because I walked here. I walked here.

Selena: Because of myself.

Steven: Because of myself. And it was hard to walk here. Like I walked here.

Selena: Oh, man.

Steven: It's not like I just took one of those flat escalators at the airport and you wind up here. It's just like, I walked here. I marveled at that for a while. And then I took some hope in the fact that, well, I'm here because of the snow which means that I have tracks that I just get to follow back to the trail. So okay, fine. I'll eat crow and ask the park rangers to give me a hand, but it should be easy to get back to the trail.

I spent probably a good eight or nine hours the next day on what were sunbaked snowpack glaciers in July afternoon were here ice sheets. I could see my footprints. But it was just like with every step and every fall, it was just... I don't believe it was God saying, "We want to really make it hurt." It was just like when you're taking those steps away from the path, metaphorically speaking, there's going to be some costs and some consequences to getting back. And you don't just get to hop over on one lane and then hop back. So I spent the day doing that.

From that point forward, that was for me kind of the extent of my own ego. It's kind of dramatic and it's kind of silly, and it's embarrassing in a way because it's just like, it could have been so much simpler. Lord was gracious enough to do for me what I needed in order to get my attention. But he was not just there in Mount Rainier waiting for me. He was there all along.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: It just took some pretty defining or just more dramatic circumstances, because I was just that dense and that prideful, frankly. And from that point forward, that was a different path for me.

Ryan: I love what you said that you heard God. It was an invitation to stop. And that's I feel like what so often is what we fail to hear is this invitation to quit trying, quit trying to whatever that... fill in the blank.

Steven: That's right.

Ryan: But it always amounts to some level of trying to find our identity, to find our significance, to find our security outside of the one place where we can only find it. And that's in God. When you share that story, it's just so like every time I've been ministered to by the Holy Spirit it's been an invitation to stop and just let God be God and I'll be a person and He will be my God. That refrain we see throughout the Old Testament: I will be their God, and they will be My people. I will be their... That's our place.

Steven: That's right.

Ryan: The thing is we try to get out of place and it wreaks havoc on our lives. Now, trauma and all and sin has broken everything and there's death, there's trauma, and there's mental illness, there's all these things that we have to figure out. But the point is we're being invited to stop trying to figure it out.

Steven: That's right.

Ryan: Not that there's a Pat answer. I still believe in mental health care and mental health counseling and stuff like that.

Brooke: Absolutely.

Ryan: We're going a little bit longer, but I think it's worth it. I'd love to just hear, so you have this encounter with God and the Holy Spirit's been working this whole time and with you the whole time. And Brooke same things happening on your end. So at what point are you guys begin the reconciliation process? And what happened there?

Steven: She had well...

Brooke: It was on that phone call actually.

Steven: Yes, she called. It was middle of the trading day and I'm working at Morgan Stanley, and she calls with an annoyed question. And all of a sudden I feel like I'm held hostage by a crying woman on the phone. There's a hostage situation-

Ryan: And I'm the guy. I'm the hostage.

Steven: Because I can't just be like kind of-

Ryan: "You're breaking up."

Steven: And I genuinely feel like, "Oh, my gosh, what's going on?" So that's when she really... it was a lot of risk, frankly. It was a lot of risk both in that moment. And then I think even in recognizing for both of us that... and this is such a challenging thing in any relationship, particularly marriage is the fact that when you sort of ask the question, at least for us, and I know there's some genuinely very unhealthy abusive one-sided relationships. I don't mean to speak to that at all.

But for us, I could say when she started saying, well, she doesn't want a relationship with me anymore, I say, well, we got divorced because of her. Just like, "Why is that Steven? Why exactly did she get to that place? Did it maybe you have something to do with that?" And so I think we both had to get to a place where we saw our own sin and we saw our own brokenness and we saw that I don't complete her and she doesn't complete me. And if we're doing this outside of mutual submission to Jesus, it's not going to work.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: well. And so she had gotten to that place.

Brooke: You might think that Steven is hard-headed being stuck up on a mountain and finally getting it. It took our divorce for me to finally be like, "Okay, Jesus, I want you in control of my life." And it was very powerful on my knees crying like, "This is my deepest heart's desire." And then the next day it was just different. Things were just different. So it wasn't seeking outside of myself at that point. Things are still hard. I was still me. It was just the focus that I had was really different—focus on God.

Steven: So we had that conversation and then I was just sort of like, "Well, why don't I pick you up?" And I had started to-

Brooke: No, you said, "Do you ever think about getting back together?"

Selena: Wooow.

- Steven:** Which as soon as I said it, I was just like, "Why are you saying that?"
- Brooke:** I hadn't. Honestly, I hadn't at all because I felt like I was so different of a person.
- Selena:** How long were you guys divorced or separated? About a year.
- Brooke:** No. At this point that we started talking and it only been a number of months.
- Steven:** Five or six months.
- Brooke:** Something like that. But things had died long before. Honestly, long before that. And I hadn't, but I was like, "Yeah, definitely." I didn't want him to think it was about him. Because it really wasn't is about me. Like, why would he want me? What I have done? I just felt really shameful and ugly with my behavior. And I'm just so different from anything that he had even seen of me. It was like I was a different person during that time.
- He was like, "Okay. How about I pick you up for church?" This was during the week. So it was I think that Sunday. Gracie, she would go and visit her dad every other weekend, so I was free a couple weekends a month. "So, yeah, you can pick me up?"
- Selena:** Wow.
- Ryan:** Started to rekindle the courtship.
- Steven:** It felt like a gift. It was almost like experience in a way that we really hadn't because we had such a brief time together when I was still stationed up here. So we were able to experience that. Then over time, I think it was just more risk that was taken. I know from Brooks part, especially as far as just expressing her hopes and desires.
- Again, it's not like, you remember waypoints in the road. It's not that everything changes at that point. But it's like something comes to your head at that point, and you realize something. I don't remember what the sermon was even on but at some point. It was talking to Genesis 1 and it was noted that there's two different—which I don't know what they are—but there's two different Hebrew words for basically "create." One essentially means you're taking raw materials, and you're putting something together or fashioning something and the other means out of nothing, something.
- Brooke:** Which only God can do.

- Steven:** Which only God can do. And that's, of course, the Hebrew word that's used in Genesis 1. And I remember sitting there and just feeling the Holy Spirit really impressing that, where it's just like, "That's what I'm doing."
- Ryan:** Wow.
- Steven:** Because it's not like, "Oh, we have some raw material." It's not like we're a fixer-upper. We just need a new coat of paint. It's just like we have nothing of value to offer each other. We have no building materials. Period. So to the extent that there is anything to build with is because He is doing a work because He is creating. So I think our life has been just continual evidence of that—of His work and all of that.
- Selena:** So you guys obviously got remarried about how long after?
- Brooke:** It was almost exactly one year. From when he moved out to when we were remarried.
- Selena:** And that's been how many years now?
- Steven:** It was 2010. So nine years ago. So this is our longest marriage ever.
- Brooke:** So far.
- Selena:** Congrats.
- Ryan:** You guys, God is so good. There's so many facets to this story. But the thread that is crystal clear, is God's redemptive power, His redemptive work that He does. He's not reactive in that He's sovereign, and He has a plan and has knowledge and all those other things. And we get to see, we get to witness it unfold. And it's for our good, it's for His glory.
- You guys have been through a lot as we've covered. There are listeners, there's a husband listening, there's a wife listening who feel like they're in a one-sided marriage. Brooke, the wife might feel like you, feel like the husband's totally gated off and unavailable, and she's feeling how you felt all those years ago. Steven, there's a husband listening to this who feels like he's just failed. Whether he's had an affair, whether he's addicted to pornography, and or he's got substance addiction abuse issues, or he's-
- Selena:** Or dealt with mental issues and she doesn't know how to walk out of...
- Ryan:** Or anxiety, depression, anything shame.

Selena: ...or what that looks like.

Ryan: So I guess just briefly, what would each of you say to a couple who's in that today right now from where you stand where you sit? What encouragement you have for them?

Steven: I mean, a) there is... and it's easier to say it certainly on this side of it than it is when you're in the middle of it, because I will forget the very words I'm about to speak the next time that I'm dealing with something painful or uncomfortable. So I'll write this down for myself as well. But that is there's hope. I mean, I think that's kind of point one. And I think there is hope in so far as the hope is not placed in yourself and your ability. And at the same time, that doesn't relieve you from responsibility.

Selena: So good.

Steven: This isn't just a wave, the devotional wand, and the Holy Spirit to fix it all. He's the first mover and we are invited to respond. So when we are convicted of our failures, we're convicted of our sin, there's a response that we get to choose. I mean, that's what makes us human effectively is the fact that we have that ability to choose. So, yeah, I think the just the presence of hope and that the hope is in you.

The sooner you get to that place. Where if you have been banking on your competence, your ability, your paycheck, your car, your whatever it is that your identity is built on in terms of "I'm the provider," or "I'm the whatever," you just got to let all that crap go. And it's not that those things are bad necessarily. It's just that if they're doubling as your identity, they're going to destroy you. They will absolutely kill you. They will turn on you in an instant.

Ryan: Wow.

Steven: I think that has to go away. That can be a really painful process. And for us, I mean, that process, frankly didn't happen willingly. I mean it happened we were kind of fighting it tooth and nail in some respects, because nobody wants to have their sin revealed, nobody wants to have their brokenness brought to the light, and no one wants to feel like... we don't certainly. I don't want to feel like I'm not strong enough to deal with my own stuff. And so you have to get to that point in order for that to be dealt with.

I would say whatever the issue is, you have to invite other people into that. We were made in and for community. And that can look very different for every individual and couples and the issues you're facing, but you're not doing

this alone. And that's the biggest lie that I think we can be told as individuals and then certainly as a couple.

I mean, we live these lives immersed in media and social media and everything else. And as much as we might know, I mean, on the other side of that picture with the newborn, he's throwing up on the mom's dress or whatever, we still feel that guilt and shame sometimes of everybody else is not dealing with these issues. They're unique to us. They're just probably not. So I think the sooner that, as a couple even, there can be an invitation for community is so important.

Ryan: I remember just a mutual friend that we share, Jake, love him and I remember him telling me the story of when he found out what you guys were going through, and he called you and he's like, "What the bleep. Why didn't you tell me you guys are going through this?" Because there's this sense of you've been doing this, you've been suffering alone, and we want to love you through it and we want to remind you of..."

Steven: He threatened physical violence on me after the fact...

Ryan: Rightly so.

Steven: ...in a very Jesus-loving way. But He was. He was like, "seriously, I love you. And if you ever do that, again... seriously, don't."

Brooke: People who have read the book had similar reactions. It's like, "I had no idea." And that made me feel really sad because then we're not giving them the opportunity to love us...

Selena: So good. So good.

Brooke: ...which I think is so important.

Selena: Speak to the wife, I guess, who was in that role.

Brooke: The first thing that popped into my head actually is that divorce is death. It's death that you will mourn. And it doesn't even matter how horrible the marriage may have been. It's something that I think will scar your heart. Just be ready for that. The weight of that decision. I mean, we see people do it all the time, you know, more than half now. So I think in some ways it's normalized. But I just think that it's something that is... you don't get over it. Definitely, you can heal from it, but it will leave a scar.

- Ryan:** So not to buy that lie that divorce is just this quick stroke of the pen and all of a sudden you just have this new life. And really what you're saying is divorce is death and you mourn it and you don't recover from it. And it's amazing.
- Brooke:** And after Steven and I got married again, remarried, everything wasn't just peachy keen.
- Ryan:** Wait, what?
- Brooke:** Yeah. I know. After we accepted Jesus and started following-
- Selena:** Right. It's just rainbow and sunshine.
- Brooke:** Yeah, yeah. There was still so much to deal with.
- Selena:** A lot of rawness.
- Brooke:** Even this last year, we've faced some pretty intense hardship and grief. And it's something that we do together and we do in community with other like-minded believers. I think it's really, really important to have... even if it's just a few other people. You don't have to have a giant group of friends and people to connect with, but the people that are going to help keep you on the path.
- Selena:** So good.
- Brooke:** And then we have all sorts of different community from there.
- Ryan:** That's awesome.
- Brooke:** We operate just in a Christian bubble, but it is important to have those mentors in your life. And sometimes you got to seek them out really intentionally and be like, "You have something I want."
- Selena:** So good.
- Ryan:** All that intentionality. The other thing that I'm seeing here is that there's this sense that Jesus has won the war, but the battle is still raging. I think of 1 Samuel 7:17. David and Goliath, right? It's like the quintessential victory story. In modern Christendom, in modern Christian culture, we think, "Oh, I'm David and Goliath is my problem or my financial problems, or my boss, or my whatever my hurdle is." I think the better reading is that Jesus is the greater David, and He has conquered Goliath. However, the story doesn't end there.
- Steven:** No.

Ryan: Because after that what happened is the Israelites went to war.

Steven: That's right.

Ryan: That was a decisive... I can't get into it here, but that's a hugely decisive victory. It was THE victory. Now they go fight. And that's what you're talking about is now you go get community, get counseling, do the work, have the hard conversations, stick around when things get hard. Because the war is won, but the battle is still there, and it's worth fighting for is what you're saying.

So given that, War Story is the name of your book. We're finally getting around to it. We're over an hour and 20 minutes into this thing. So tell us about what War Story is, I mean, just briefly. It's this and more. And then what are you working on now? Because you're working on something really exciting right now with the Elliott Fund. I'd love to hear about that.

Steven: War Story it's effectively my military memoir. And I say my, I mean, somewhat with heavy quotations. I mean, I'm the author, but it's very much our story. Brooke and my story as well, because she's been a part of virtually all of it save for you didn't deploy to Afghanistan but you-

Brooke: Thank God for that.

Steven: But she's the most significant character in the story for sure. It's a story. It doesn't have prescribed takeaways or anything like that. It's just this is what we experienced, this is what I experienced. And to include a lot of darkness and to include God's healing and work redemption as we've talked about a little bit.

The point of the story is not to just tell the story. The point of it is to use the story. Our intention and even in rewriting it is to use a story as a catalyst to talk about these issues of the unseen wounds of war. And particularly, the stigma and the broken policies that still pervade within the active duty military. A lot of attention gets paid to the VA, the quote-unquote, veteran, which that's fine. But the one thing that all veterans have in common is that they all were once on active duty.

And if they're suffering from an unseen wound of war as I was for a number of years... I was the equivalent of somebody who didn't realize I had a gunshot wound until they had left Afghanistan five years prior. So then you have that wound that's metastasized into other things. So our hope is that a) all the proceeds from the book that I would otherwise receive, that we'd otherwise receive are going to be given away to organizations that are doing good work

at really the bleeding edge of the mental health epidemic in our country. That's not confined to the military, but it's certainly there.

But then also we're using that as a platform for social change. We've identified with partner organizations 17 key policy initiatives that we are asking the Secretary of Defense and the chairman of the House and the Senate Armed Services Committees to take up. And we were saying that if these were implemented, we're not saying that's going to... we can't fix culture overnight. You can't legislate culture. And there's a lot of cultural brokenness with respect to the military and how it views mental health in general. But we have to start somewhere.

And so we believe that those policy changes would meaningfully improve how mental health is viewed and treated in the active duty ranks. So that we're not talking about people that are then the VA's problem or then sleeping on somebody's couch going through divorce, or who are dealing with a DUI or domestic violence or whatever. Because that's what happens is these things metastasize and then you're dealing with problems built on top of problems. That's our hope is...

Selena: That's awesome.

Steven: ...is to put the story in service of that cost.

Selena: It's incredible.

Ryan: And I can say it's incredibly important mission. I mean, I've gotten to talk you through it, and I get to serve with you in the Elliott Fund, which is the nonprofit that you guys set up to kind of facilitate the giving the money away.

Steven: That's right.

Ryan: But the book is called... and I want to say this, Steven is an incredibly good writer.

Steven: Thank you.

Ryan: I only read a few pages because we're in the thick of writing our own book. It's not going to be this good.

Selena: Definitely not.

- Ryan:** But it's the first one on my list to read completely. And I mean, Steven, you're the kind of guy that I'll run into you in a coffee shop and you're reading something. It's Dante in Italian, right?
- Steven:** Not exactly.
- Ryan:** Okay. But pretty much. Pretty much. So it's called War Story. Sometimes the real fight starts after the battle. If you want to find out more, listeners, find that on Amazon. But also, if you want to read more about what Steven and Brooke are up to, go to Elliottfund.org.
- Steven:** You got it.
- Ryan:** You don't accept money through donations, but it tells people what you're doing, and they can be part of it. And they can sign the petition. Right?
- Steven:** Correct, yeah.
- Ryan:** So you're creating a movement. I think I fully believe 20, 30 years from now we're going to look back and say this was a big part of that shift in hopefully military culture. I know, right?
- Steven:** Yeah
- Brooke:** Yeah.
- Ryan:** Let's wait and see what God does. This is so exciting.
- Steven:** That's right.
- Ryan:** Anyway, we're going to send our Fierce Marriage listeners over there.
- Selena:** Yeah, absolutely.
- Ryan:** Anyway, Brooke, and Steven, thank you guys so much for joining us, being open and honest and transparent. I know it's going to bless some people. Thank you.
- Steven:** Thank you.
- Brooke:** Thank you so much. It's a great opportunity.
- Steven:** Yeah, thank you so much.

Ryan:

What a joy it is to see God's goodness and grace through Steven and Brooke's story. You can find Steven's book "War Story" wherever books are sold. Additionally, Steven and Brooke are the founders of the Elliott Fund, which exists to advocate for reform in how the unseen wounds of war are viewed and treated so that the broken places can be made whole. To learn more, visit Elliottfund.org.

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PODCAST NOTES

- **[00:00:26]**
 - Recommended Resources:
 - [Steven's Story](#)
 - [Steven's Book: War Story](#)
 - [Elliottfund.org](#)

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