

CruciformPress

# WRESTLING WITH AN ANGEL

A Story of Love, Disability  
and the Lessons of Grace

Greg Lucas

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*A Story of Love, Disability and the  
Lessons of Grace*

**Greg Lucas**

Cruciform Press | Released November, 2010

To my wife, Kim, whose tenacious love, forgiveness,  
mercy, sacrifice, and grace is my greatest earthly  
reminder of what the gospel is all about.

– Greg Lucas

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to others. That would be illegal and in  
violation of Scripture. Thanks!**

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“Witty... stunning...striking... humorous and heartfelt. In our culture which is so quick to devalue life, *Wrestling with an Angel* provides a fresh, honest look at one father’s struggle to embrace God in the midst of his son’s disability. Can sheer laughter and weeping gracefully coexist in a world of so much affliction? Greg knows all about it. And inside these pages he passes on his lessons of grace to us. I highly recommend this wonderfully personal book!”

**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Joni and Friends International  
Disability Center

“I didn’t want to read this book. I knew these tear-stained but hope-filled pages would jostle me out of my comfort zone and shake me up. C.S. Lewis wrote that he paradoxically loved *The Lord of the Rings* because it ‘broke his heart’ — and Greg Lucas’ writing does the same for me. And it’s for that reason that I heartily commend this book — especially for dads. This is just the book many of us need to taste afresh the goodness of God and the grace of the gospel even as we long for the day when this broken world will be made right.”

**Justin Taylor**, Managing Editor, *ESV Study Bible*

“This is *not* primarily a book for parents of special needs children. Only one disability keeps a person from heaven. It is not physical or mental. It is the sin that lives in our hearts. Jake’s father, Greg, is a captivating storyteller. When he writes about life with Jake, I recognize God’s grace and loving persistence in my life. I want more!”

**Noël Piper**, author, and wife of pastor and author John Piper

“You will laugh; you will cry. You will feel sick; you will feel inspired. You will be repulsed by sin’s ugliness; you will be overwhelmed by God’s love. Greg Lucas takes us on an unforgettable ride on the roller coaster of Christian experience, as he extracts the most beautiful insights into grace from the most painful experiences of life. This brutally honest and deeply moving book helps us to see that we all have special needs that only a special Savior can supply.”

**David P. Murray**, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“It is the rare book that makes much of God and our dependency on Him while also celebrating His goodness through hard things. Using his own example of parenting a child with significant disabilities, Greg demonstrates what relying on a sovereign God through extreme difficulty and suffering looks like. This book is a gift to the church, and particularly to men who need an example of masculine, Biblical leadership in the face of complex, confusing, and overwhelming circumstances. If you have ever confronted hardship and questioned God’s goodness, this book provides a real-life example of trusting in the promises of God.”

**John Knight**, Senior Director for Development, Desiring God

“Jesus told us that we must suffer with him in order to be glorified with him. All of us in Christ face different sorts of trials, but they are all shaping us up for the same purpose: conformity with Christ. In this book, Greg Lucas gives insight into his own experience of cross-bearing. A family facing disability, or those who love and minister to people in such situations, will certainly benefit from this story.”

**Russell D. Moore**, Pastor; Dean of the School of Theology, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Author, *Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches*

“Greg communicates from a heart that loves Jesus deeply and does not shy away from the theological challenges his family context brings. Throughout the pages of this book, Greg has captured personal glimpses of grace in both amazing and, seemingly, mundane ways. Amazing as seen in God’s sovereign hand of protection. Mundane as portrayed in what would normally be a simple task but with Jake requires great grace. It is the grace Greg has described as amazing “grace-ability,” on display in their son’s disability. As the father of a child with special needs, I wholeheartedly recommend *Wrestling with an Angel*.”

**Justin Reimer**, Executive Director, The Elisha Foundation

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# One **BREAK | EQUIP**

Grace breaks us with affliction in order to equip us  
with comfort and compassion

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)*

It sounded at first like something out of an old horror movie. I thought maybe someone was just playing around, but then I heard it again and again, a loud piercing cry, and less like Hollywood every time. The windows were down in my police cruiser on that warm fall day, but I still couldn't tell where the sounds came from. I began looking around for the unlikely sight of someone being disemboweled in a mall parking lot on a Saturday afternoon. Seeing nothing, and still hearing the screams, I called in a "disturbance." Around the next corner I found the source of the commotion.

A small crowd had their backs to me, watching what I could only imagine was a horrible fight between two grown men. As I rolled up to the scene, I notified 911 of my location and turned on my overhead emergency lights, hoping to disperse the brawl with a sudden display of authoritative police presence. Not until I exited my vehicle, ready to inflict some defensive tactics if needed, did I comprehend what was actually taking place.

Sitting in the middle of the parking lot was a full-grown man with his socks and shoes off, hitting himself in the face and screaming. An elderly gentleman was trying his best to collect the socks and shoes and get him on his feet again. But the seated man, the much larger of the two, would not be budged.

It was clear to everyone that the man on the ground was mentally disabled, and the elderly man was his father. The onlookers didn't know whether to call for help, offer help, or politely walk away. They seemed relieved that a uniformed official was there to deliver them from their paralyzing confusion.

I immediately cleared the crowd and asked the father if he needed assistance. The elderly man explained to me that he had picked up his son for a day visit from the group home where he lived.

“I knew better than to go at it alone, but sometimes he does really well. I wanted to spend

some time with him so I brought him to the mall to get him some new shoes. He was fine until we got to the parking lot," said the exasperated dad. "When he gets upset he takes off his socks and shoes. His name is Donald."

At 6'3" and about 220 pounds, Donald was an imposing figure even while sitting there barefoot on the asphalt. He was in his mid 30s with a rough complexion from many self-inflicted scars. His emotions seemed to calm slightly when I arrived at the scene, but his face was still contorted with anxiety as he fumbled with his socks. Donald looked like he could handle himself all right, along with me and his father.

I knelt down to his level (even though he would not make eye contact) and introduced myself. "I'm Officer Lucas, but you can call me Greg. What's going on, buddy?"

Again the older man began nervously explaining to me what was wrong with his son. I stood up and tried to listen, but all I could focus on was the exhaustion and defeat in this father's eyes. My attention came back to his words when I heard him say in a cracked and broken voice, "I'm getting too old for this."

I guessed he was probably in his mid- to late-60s, but he looked to be nearly 80. He was tall and thin and frail-looking, white-haired and balding. He

wore a dark flannel shirt and blue jeans, like an old farmer come to town for supplies. I could only imagine the hurt, disappointment, and weariness this man had experienced over the previous thirty years. But I didn't exactly have to imagine everything.

As he turned away for a moment, frustrated with the scene his son had created, the father muttered, "I'm so tired." I paused for a moment to let him regain his composure. Then I realized why I was there.

"I know what you are going through, Sir," I said, recognizing at the moment it escaped my mouth how cliché it must sound.

"You do?" he said skeptically.

"Yes, I do. I have a son just like your son. He's much younger and not nearly as big. But he has special needs like your Donald, and he throws very similar fits when he doesn't get his way. His name is Jake, and he is my life's great challenge."

I placed my hand on the dad's shoulder and smiled, "And I know you're tired."

I cautiously knelt back down to Donald's level and picked up his shoes and socks. I wasn't sure how he would react to me invading his space and I fully expected to be kicked or punched by this large, confused man. Slowly I un-balled one of his socks and began putting it back on his foot. To my relief, he extended his leg in a sort of surrender to let me know he would comply.

I rolled the sock gently over his toes to his heel and then up to his ankle. His pale, crooked feet felt cold and damp, and his long, sharp toenails were in need of a trim.

Probably true to his lifelong routine, he extended the other foot for me to do the same. Once both socks were on, I unlaced his large, worn-out tennis shoes, slipped them on his feet one at a time, and cinched them up and gave them a double-knot like I had done for Jake so many times before.

A stark vision from John 13 of Jesus washing His disciples' feet flashed across my mind, and I smiled as I thought to myself that the Lord may have had even this day and this parking lot in mind when He told His confused disciples, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand."

I was beginning to understand that there was much more going on here than a simple police response to an unspecified disturbance at a mall.

Once the disheveled, child-like man was ready to get back on his feet again, I asked his dad, "What does Donald really like?"

"Chicken nuggets and coffee," he replied. I turned back to Donald and slowly but excitedly asked, "How would you like your dad to take you to get some chicken nuggets and coffee, buddy?" He gave a silent nod of approval and we helped him off the ground and into the truck.

After buckling Donald in, the elderly man returned to his side of the truck with a simple expression of gratitude. He shook my hand and thanked me in a voice drained of all emotion. I shot back, “No problem, I do this for a living.”

Despite my official duties that day, I knew from experience that mostly he was thanking me because I could offer empathy and not just sympathy. Sometimes just being aware that someone else knows—I mean really knows what you are going through—is enough to bring great comfort in the midst of great despair. We both smiled with a freshly strengthened connection as I opened the driver’s door for him.

Just before climbing into the truck he turned to me and said, “You know it gets worse, right?”

“What gets worse?” I asked.

“Your son,” he replied. “It gets worse as they get older and you get older. They get stronger and you get weaker. You still love them the same, but it becomes impossible for you to take care of them. Even short visits become like this—impossible.”

His words crushed me as I began to see myself in his weary face. I struggled to find some departing words of encouragement and hope—words for two desperate dads living in different seasons of the same struggling life.

“Grace is like that, you know,” I said in response.

"It exposes our weakness in order to give us greater strength. I guess that's why we all have to depend on someone a little stronger than ourselves." At the moment, it was the best I could do.

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied contemplatively as he shut the truck door. "Thanks again, friend," and he drove away.

As the two men rolled off the parking lot in the old pickup truck, I watched the weary dad lift his arm and place it around the shoulder of his disabled son. A prodigal never finds love so satisfying and sweet as he finds it in the unconditional arms of his father.

I returned to my police cruiser, drove to the far end of the parking lot, and fell to pieces, wrestling hard against the tears of stored-up emotion liberated though this unexpected encounter. Through force of will I soon regained my composure, hoping no one had glimpsed this tough, stoic, in-control cop crying like an infant.

The thought of it ever getting any more difficult absolutely devastated me. As hard as it had been, I had always clung to the hope that someday it would get better; someday it would get easier. I lived with an unspoken assumption that someday Jake would learn to use the bathroom, someday learn to communicate his needs, someday be less frustrated, less combative, less compulsive, less confused. That someday I would be able to hold it all together and be the dad I ought to be for Jake.

The cold, hard truth had hit me like a storm. It might actually get worse.

*My body will get older and weaker and Jake will get bigger and stronger and more defiant. His needs will increase as my abilities to care for him decrease. No matter how frail I get, Jake will never be able to care for me—it will never be that way with us. Jake will always need to be taken care of, and someday I will not be able to give him what he needs.*

I hear religious-minded people say all the time with good intentions, “God will never place a burden on you so heavy that you cannot carry it.”

Really?

My experience is that God will place a burden on you so heavy that you cannot possibly carry it alone. He will break your back and your will. He will buckle your legs until you fall flat beneath the crushing weight of your load. All the while He will walk beside you waiting for you to come to the point where you must depend on Him.

“My power is made perfect in your weakness,” He says, as we strain under our burden.

Whatever the burden, it might indeed get worse, but I know this—God is faithful. And while we change and get old, He does not. When we get weaker, He remains strong. And in our weakness and humility, He offers us true, lasting, transforming, and undeserved grace.

It is this grace that enables us to do more than survive in this world. Grace enables us to thrive in the presence of this world's sufferings while magnifying the One who breaks us with affliction—that He might equip us with comfort, compassion, and strength to give to others.

In the midst of this deep, celestial moment, I realized I had just experienced a divine appointment. This was not just a providential assignment for an empathetic police officer sent to help a weary father with his disabled son. This was more, a lesson of grace that would stay locked in my own heart until I would need it most in the months and years to come.

And I would need it.

In response, I stood for a moment on holy ground praising the God of mercy and comfort, asking for more strength and grace for the future with my own son. My worshipful hymn and prayer of praise sounded like this:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the same comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

(2 Corinthians 1:3-4)



TWO

# DISPLAY | REVEAL

Grace displays our sin as in a mirror, but reveals the cross as through a window

*In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.... We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:10, 19)*

The alarm goes off inside my head usually a few moments before the clock on my nightstand sets in motion the events of the morning. It is amazing how the mind and body can synch to a scheduled stimulus response, almost to the minute, each and every day.

It's 5:58 a.m., and I have two minutes before my morning routine begins.

I watch the clock and wait for the alarm. It's not a desire for more sleep that holds me in place. Nor is it the comfort of my blanket on this crisp, cold, dark morning. I take refuge in my bed for these few peaceful moments to think about my life.

I reflect on my weakness and inability to meet

the demands that have been placed on me through the circumstances of my journey. I wonder why God's plan for my life includes so much frustration and hurt. Then I question why God even has a plan for me at all as I contemplate my sin, self-centeredness, pride, and constant sense of failure.

Suffering seems to be the tool He uses to draw me close. But the very affliction of my soul and the anxious weariness of my heart, things that should force me to run to the light, often drive me furiously into the darkness.

I know He loves me and cares for me, but sometimes I cannot understand this strange affection. What kind of love is it that brings so much pain into my life—especially from a sovereign being who has the power to make all things right. And so, by nature, I resist the One who ultimately has designed all these difficult conditions for my good and for His glory.

It's 5:59 a.m. I want to turn off the alarm, go back to sleep, and wake up in a different place and time. I want to wake up a better man, or in different circumstances, something other than what's right here, right now. I am exhausted already, simply by anticipating the next twenty minutes. Guilt begins to disguise itself as conviction, and so I pray.

*Father, forgive me for my sins—cleanse me from all unrighteousness. Make the cross of your Son visible*

*for me this morning as I approach this day. Show me your greatness in the smallness of my life. Lord, I am helpless against what is before me this morning, and I do not know what to do. But my eyes are on you. Please wake my son gently and peacefully. Create in him a good mood and a cooperative spirit. Give him an understanding of your love. Give me an understanding of your love. Ease his frustration and help me get him out of bed, cleaned, dressed, and off to school. Create in me the heart of a father, that I might be the man my son needs me to be. Make me more like Jesus. None of this will be possible unless you intervene in my life and my family this morning. Lord, before my feet touch the floor, give me strength and grace—especially grace. I am desperate for your grace...*

The shrill tone of the alarm clock pierces my thoughts and brings an impromptu *amen* to my prayer. A bit startled, my heart begins to beat faster, pumping much-needed blood into my reluctant extremities, a slight injection of adrenaline to assure the job gets done.

Strength and grace, before my feet touch the floor. Its 6:00 a.m., and I'm ready for the fight.

\* \* \*

Almost every morning I have to restrain my son physically. To get him out of bed, change his diaper,

and clean his body usually requires a degree of sheer, measured force. When he was small this was easier. But now Jake is the size of a small man, and stronger than some full-grown men. He is long and muscular, strong and lean. When he was born six weeks premature in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, he weighed less than five pounds. But this morning his large feet jut out from underneath his covers and hang off the edge of the bed, and a dangling arm rests a loosened fist on the floor.

I try to rouse him peacefully by gently rubbing his long, warm back beneath his t-shirt, speaking soft words of sweet affection. I usually know within the first few seconds whether it is going to be a “good day” or a “bad day.” Sometimes he wakes gently and allows me to continue this display of affection, stirring slowly and quietly. Those days are rare. Most mornings he resists, pushing me away and protesting my invasion of his rest with a loud, high-pitched, piercing whine that shatters the morning peace like a rock through a window.

After physically raising him from his bed and placing his feet on the floor, I begin the dangerous duty of undressing my teenage son — shirt off, pants off, socks off, diaper off. His whining increases as I remove the clothing, partly because he knows what’s coming next, but mostly because of the sensory integration disorder that brings misery with his nakedness.

Placing Jake on a towel in the middle of the floor, I begin cleaning the excess mess from his backside to make the impending bath as sanitary as possible. This necessary action increases his sensory overload, amplifying his verbal protests and producing a violent thrashing of his long, powerful legs. It's not that Jake likes being dirty. He just hates being cleaned.

By this time, my sweet wife is usually standing in the bedroom doorway, awakened by the noise of the morning ritual. Her presence is always comforting. She comes to encourage me, and to try to calm Jake with a quiet, pleading tone. She also comes to help with the next phase.

Two people are needed to bathe our son. It's not wise even to try if you're alone. You might be able to begin the process by yourself—and on rare occasions you can even complete it—but you nearly always need to call in your backup at some point. One person to hold Jake in the tub, the other to scrub him clean. Most mornings there is much to scrub. Human fecal matter can dry hard as plaster—one item from the "Things Nobody Should Have to Know" vault of my life. Contained inside the diaper, it is usually not too much trouble. Matted in hair, packed under fingernails, or even coating the teeth, is quite a different story.

After bath time it's back to the bedroom floor

where lotion is applied, clean clothes are fitted, socks and shoes are put on and cinched up. Next, I lay Jake down on the floor again. Kneeling, I straddle his body and pin both his arms securely but gently against his body between my knees. I sing a calming song while I brush his crooked teeth—straining to hold him down and get the job done.

Much of this same routine is repeated after school, then after dinner, and then again just before bed. While not every change of clothing and cleaning of the body requires a bath, every single attempt at personal hygiene comes with a fight.

Many times while cleaning and changing Jake, I have been kicked in the face, bitten, smacked, clawed, spit on, or hit with flying objects. It is not too unusual to come away from one of these cleanups with a bloody lip or a new scratch. Every attempt to prepare him for the day becomes a violent struggle played out on several levels, my best intentions pitted against his greatest resistance.

Many mornings I leave Jake's room dejected, hurt, and emotionally drained. Many evenings, in desperation, I find myself restraining his struggles by wrapping him in my arms against his will and gently whispering, "I love you. I love you. I love you—no matter what."

How do you care for someone who resists your love with violence, who opposes your very presence

even when that presence is necessary for his good? How do you keep on loving when the person you are devoted to seems incapable of affection? The only way to make any sense of this kind of relationship is to experience it through the truly unconditional love of the Father.

Much like my son, I have been disabled all my life. My disability affects everything I am and everything I do. Scripture diagnoses this disability as sin. Not individual acts of sin, but a sin nature, sin residing within my heart. It causes me to reject love and embrace fear. It plagues me with a slumber that makes me strangely satisfied to lie in my own filth and not be disturbed. It's not that I like being dirty. I just hate being cleaned.

But God is patient, kind, and full of grace. He knows how I am made, but He does not excuse it. He refuses to permit my life to take its natural course. He has sacrificed much to make me His son, and He will not stand by when I am in need—even when I resist His compassion and care.

In my son I see a picture of my own relationship with God. In Jake's defiant refusal to be loved, cared for, and washed, I am reminded of the cross. There, the violence of divine love overpowered my rebellion and forced upon me a process of cleansing redemption that I did not want to undergo. In some ways the process is still ongoing, and most days, I

still resist. In my persistent disability I fight against the transformation being worked in me. But I face a power greater than my own and a love stronger than my rebellion. It is as if a bloody, beaten, crucified Savior wraps me in His arms, subdues me with His affection, and whispers in my ear, “I love you. I love you. I love you—no matter what.”