

## Chapter 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)