

FOREWORD BY  
**LEE STROBEL**

**GREG STIER**

**UNLIKELY  
FIGHTER**

*The Story of How a  
Fatherless Street Kid  
Overcame Violence, Chaos  
& Confusion to Become  
a Radical Christ  
Follower*

Beyond the brawls, bruises, and blood splattered across the pages of this hard-to-put-down book is the story of a scared, scarred little kid on a journey to find his identity. You will find yourself cheering, like I did, for the victory he, and eventually his entire family, found in Jesus.

**SAMUEL RODRIGUEZ**, pastor of New Season Church and president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference

This book is wild! Full of larger-than-life characters, divine encounters, authentic brokenness, and miraculous intervention and reconciliation! And it's all true. If Greg offers us one thing, it's hope—hope that the most unlikely and undeserving of us can find the way of life through the radical love of Jesus. This book will unleash a longing in you to be part of the wild adventure of God's Kingdom come!

**DANIELLE STRICKLAND**, author, advocate, and speaker

Listen, I want to be a part of anything Greg Stier does. He is always a blessing, and you'll be blessed by his new book, *Unlikely Fighter*! It's his personal story of God working in his life. You'll love the way he tells his story, and you'll feel like you're right there with him. It's real and unfiltered. But most importantly, it isn't just any story—it's a testimony of redemption, how God is mighty to save. Be sure to read this for yourself, and gift a copy to a young person!

**SHANE PRUITT**, national Next Gen evangelism director for North American Mission Board and author of *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*

Greg Stier is the genuine article, and his life is evidence of God's transforming power. If you've given up on yourself, take a page out of Greg's book. The gospel can change anything, change anyone.

**MARK BATTERSON**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

I resonated deeply with Greg Stier's amazing testimony. As someone whose own upbringing was highly dysfunctional, I never cease to be amazed by the Lord's incredible grace in reaching down and placing his tender hand upon children surrounded by violence and brokenness. The story of how God's mercy brought salvation to Greg and each of his family members is something that will stay with you for a long time.

**JIM DALY**, president of Focus on the Family

In the '70s, I grew up in the same North Denver neighborhood as Greg, and in the early '80s, we became best friends while attending the same small fundamentalist Christian school. His intelligence, sharp wit, and spiritual passion were evident even back then. From his fatherless upbringing, to the shocking violence he witnessed as a child, to the dramatic conversation of his entire family, this book gave me a greater appreciation and understanding of Greg's early life experience and how that helped shape him into such a dynamically driven and influential adult.

**SCOTT DERRICKSON**, film director, screenwriter, and producer

Who doesn't like a good story? Greg tells a soul-wrenching true story of how low the Lord had to reach to draw him to himself. It's a *miracle*! The best part is what has happened since.

**JOHNNY HUNT**, senior vice president of evangelism and leadership for the North American Mission Board

Captivating craziness of a life woven and chosen by Christ to be a voice of victory for generations and nations! Hope lines these pages of Greg's story that everyone needs to hear!

**KATHY BRANZELL**, president of the National Day of Prayer Task Force

Greg's memoir deeply reminded me there is no sin too great nor sinner too far gone that Jesus cannot forgive or save. Thank you, Greg, for sharing your story of God's amazing grace. I pray many would read and be blessed and that many would read and come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

**ED STETZER**, executive director of the Wheaton College Billy Graham Center

*Unlikely Fighter* is a page-turner. If I didn't know Greg personally, I'd be tempted to think these stories were made up. But they're real. And they collectively make one powerful point: *the power of God can change anyone*. If you don't think God can change you, I dare you to read this book with an open heart.

**SEAN MCDOWELL**, PhD, associate professor of apologetics at Biola University and the coauthor of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*

When you meet my friend Greg, instantly you will experience two things: he loves Jesus, and he loves for others to love Jesus. The love of Jesus pulsates in his body like electricity. And when you read *Unlikely Fighter*, that same electric volt will captivate your heart. This book is going to make you laugh out loud, it is going to make you cry. But above all, your passion for Jesus and his love for the world will be ignited!

**DR. DERWIN L. GRAY**, lead pastor of Transformation Church and the author of *God, Do You Hear Me?: Discover the Prayer God Always Answers*

For anyone who doesn't feel qualified to share the story of Jesus, this book is for you. You are more qualified than you know. With vulnerability, humor, and a genuine, unashamed love for the lost, Greg powerfully demonstrates how God uses the unlikely to reveal his love. Thank you, Greg, for equipping and empowering a generation to know Jesus and share the gospel.

**HOSANNA WONG**, international speaker, spoken word artist, and author of *How (Not) to Save the World*

Greg is a powerful communicator of the gospel to the next generation. I've heard some of the shocking stories from his violent upbringing woven into his sermons, but this book paints a much clearer picture of the often terrifying yet ultimately triumphant upbringing that Greg endured. This book is a powerful display that the gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" . . . even for a family like Greg's.

**DOUG FIELDS**, author, speaker, and youth pastor

GREG STIER

# UNLIKELY

*The Story of How a Fatherless Street Kid Overcame Violence,  
Chaos & Confusion to Become a Radical Christ Follower*

# FIGHTER

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*Unlikely Fighter: The Story of How a Fatherless Street Kid Overcame Violence, Chaos, and Confusion to Become a Radical Christ Follower*

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*To my ma, who loved me  
in spite of her shame*





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# FOREWORD

*I'VE GOTTEN TO KNOW* a lot of extraordinary people through the years, but Greg Stier is among my very favorites. When we first met, we instantly felt a special affinity. We shared a mutual passion for telling as many people as possible about Jesus. In short, our hearts beat in unison for seeing lives and eternities transformed by Christ.

As I've gotten to know Greg better, though, I've come to realize there's another commonality that binds us together: both of us are unlikely fighters.

Three thousand years ago, a shepherd boy named David—armed with nothing more than a sling and a stone—successfully took on a nine-foot-six warrior, thanks to God's guiding hand. Similarly, Greg and I have faced and fought our own giants that were simply too big and imposing for us to defeat on our own.

For me, the battle was against the skepticism that propelled me down the path of atheism. My cynical self-interest convinced me there was no God and therefore anything was permissible. That resulted in a life of hedonism that deeply hurt my family and me.

It wasn't until my agnostic wife's conversion to Christianity that I used my journalism and legal training in a quest to disprove her faith—only to become persuaded by the evidence that Jesus is the unique Son of God who proved his divinity by returning from the dead.

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As for Greg, he wrestled with his personal identity. As an almost-aborted, fatherless teen from the inner city, surrounded by a violence-prone family (with the biceps to back it up), Greg fought throughout his childhood and teen years to find out who he was, whose he was, and why he was.

Greg's life was on a downward spiral until a series of unlikely events changed the trajectory of his life—and, ultimately, that of his entire family.

What I love about Greg is that he has continued fighting to this very day. Now he's battling the ultimate adversary, Satan himself, in order to help every last person have a chance to hear the same Good News that set Greg and his family free.

In this captivating and encouraging book, you'll read the fascinating details of Greg's rocky journey to Christ and his new mission to ignite a spiritual revival. In fact, Greg and I are now fighting for you—that is, every reader of this book—to have the same deep encounter with God that has changed everything for us and our families.

Because in a way, we're all unlikely fighters who are engaged in various struggles of our own. Whether it's spiritual skepticism (as it was for me), personal identity (as it was for Greg), or some other battle that you're waging, I want you to know that we're cheering you on.

And I'm betting that this book will give you a strong infusion of Holy Spirit-inspired courage to swing the sling, fling the stone, and topple the giant that's blocking your path to a life of hope, freedom, and unparalleled adventure through Christ.

*Lee Strobel*  
*Bestselling author of The Case for Christ*

# INTRODUCTION

**THE APOSTLE PAUL** called himself “the chief of sinners,” but he had never met the members of my family. If he had, he may have had to forfeit his title.

I often start my sermons with the same two sentences: “I don’t come from a typical churchgoing, pew-sitting, hymn-singing family. I come from a family filled with body-building, tobacco-chewing, beer-drinking thugs . . . and that’s just the women.”

After everyone laughs at the unexpected twist, I go on to tell some of the wild, teetering-on-unbelievable stories of my family upbringing. Sometimes I tell stories about my baseball-bat-wielding, shame-filled mom (who I always called Ma), or my fist-throwing, cop-choking Uncle Jack, or my beat-you-till-you-cry-or-die Uncle Bob.

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But the stories I tell in this book always finish the same way, demonstrating that the power of God can change any person in any family from any background.

“Are those stories true?” is a question I usually get asked after I preach a sermon that includes some family stories.

“Yes, they are true” is the answer I always give.

Much of what I share in this book I’ve seen with my own eyes. The other stories have been corroborated by the eyewitness testimony of family and family friends, many of whom I’ve spent hours interviewing for this book.

And, just to prepare you, much of it is violent. As troubling as some of the stories were to write, it was exponentially more troubling to experience them as a scared kid. Although most of the violence was not against me, it impacted me deeply and left a mark on my soul that is still there to this day.

When writing a memoir, you depend on memories, your own and others’, to get the facts straight. I’ve done my best to do just that in this book. But only God’s Word is infallible and inerrant.

Before I was old enough to get my driver’s license, I had seen more rage, more dysfunction, and more blood than most people will see their entire lives. It was every bit as dramatic and traumatic as you can imagine.

And I wouldn’t change any of it because this is my story of rescue. Actually, it’s my entire family’s rescue story. God rescued us from our sins and ourselves, and the entire trajectory of our family has been forever altered.

I am so grateful for his grace and mercy toward us, the chiefs of sinners.

# “A BUM LIKE ME”

*A TYPICAL WARM SPRING DAY IN DENVER*—the sky clear, the air dry, and the sun bright. Saturdays were for cleaning. Although we were dirt poor, we weren't, in Ma's words, “dirty poor.”

While she cleaned inside, I played outside, my yellow Tonka dump truck, a couple G.I. Joes, and an assortment of toy guns strewn across the porch. But on this particular Saturday, my yellow plastic Wiffle bat had my undivided attention. I loved hitting the harmless white Wiffle balls around—especially out on the street. I could slug them good and hard, then watch them soar through the air and roll and roll. When the bat connected with the ball, just for a moment, everything felt right in the universe. I imagined this might be what it felt like to be a typical kid in a typical family in a typical neighborhood.



## UNLIKELY FIGHTER

I was trying to muster up the courage to ask Ma if I could take it out to the street to hit a few, even though I suspected she would say no. She didn't want me to stray too far from our run-down rental—one of those old, red-brick cracker-box duplexes built in the early 1900s for the working class. Over the decades, the working class had moved up and out of the neighborhood and passed off these dilapidated, two-bedroom sardine-cans to the poor.

As with “home base” when playing tag, I felt safe at home. Sure, we had our share of scares, but when my mom was there, I knew nobody could touch me. She was the ultimate mama bear, a mixture of a soccer mom and the Terminator—the Mominator.

Ma was a fighter. She'd been raised in a violent family. Her dad, who loaded hundred-pound bags of flour by hand day in and day out, was known to knock bad guys out with a single punch. Her brothers, all five of them, were as tough as they come—a uniquely violent crew made up of street fighters, soldiers, boxers, brawlers, martial artists, and take-you-apart-ists.

And Ma could brawl with the best of them. Although she was always told that she looked like a young Elizabeth Taylor, she had the punch of Chuck Norris.

But I don't want to paint the picture of my mom as a violent beast. She was the most generous person I have ever known. She had almost nothing, but would give her meager resources—money, clothes, food—to those around her in genuine need.

But if you were a jerk, she would jerk you back to reality—sometimes with a sudden yank, sometimes with a punch.

Ma was a one-of-a-kind combo—a strange mixture of generosity, honesty, and kindness combined with a hair-trigger

temper and ready fists to back it up. I have never seen the likes of her anywhere. Like a cocktail mixed on a whim one night with a variety of ingredients you can't quite remember, Ma was special. And, like a cocktail, she came with a kick.

We lived in North Denver, which, in the 1970s, was “the bad part of town.” Sirens were no stranger to our neighborhood—or to our house. The neighborhood was a tinderbox of racial tension between the Italians and the Latinos. Shouting matches, fights, gunshots, and knifings were common.

Ma was terrified that trouble would find me someday without her around to protect me. She knew I really wasn't a fighter—not *that* kind of fighter, anyway. I was a quiet kid who loved books. And book-loving kids didn't fare well in our neighborhood.

Maybe that's why Ma relentlessly reminded me of the dangers lurking out there on the streets for little boys who wandered away from home alone. Ma would warn me about the predators in the park. “They'll snag you off the jungle gym, and you'll never be seen again,” she threatened. There were molesters at the mall, too. “Stay by my side the whole time, or they'll grab you and run,” she cautioned. And there were stalkers in the street. “They're just waiting for the right time to throw you in their van and speed away.”

Ma was truly afraid that some really bad stuff could happen to me in our crime-infested neighborhood. Giving me all these worst-case scenarios was her way of trying to make me street smart.

On that spring day in Denver, I knew the chances of her letting me hit Wiffle balls in the street without my older brother, Doug, or one of my scrappy, street-smart older cousins was slim.

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As I gazed out to the street longingly, a brand-new car slowly pulled up to the curb. It caught my attention not only because it was right in front of me but because the car was so shiny and clean—a real rarity in our neighborhood.

What really caught my attention was the man in the driver's seat. After he parked the car, he just sat there. He was strangely still, gripping the steering wheel. Seconds passed, but he just sat there with the car running.

*Is this one of the “bad guys” Ma is always warning me about?* I strained my eyes to see if I could catch a glimpse of his face. A flash of familiarity swept over me.

It was Paul—my stepdad. Ma had married him just a few months earlier. I don't remember a wedding. I don't even remember them dating. Maybe it was one of those spur-of-the-moment weddings.

Paul was different from the kind of men Ma usually attracted. She was typically surrounded by “manly” men, men covered in tattoos, back when tats were a sign that you had been in the armed forces or prison or both. Paul, on the other hand, always wore a white short-sleeved button-up shirt and tie to work. I had no clue what he did for a living, but I was impressed that he got dressed up to go to work. Perhaps Paul was Ma's shot at respectability.

But Paul, just like the other men who had been in her life, just wasn't working out. And he knew it.

One day, out of the blue, he just disappeared. He packed up his stuff while Ma was at work and left us. She came home, and he was gone. Poof. No note, no phone call, no Paul.

We had no idea where he went.

For days Ma had been mumbling under her breath, between

cigarette puffs, while washing dishes or cleaning up around the house, “Paul, that jerk! If he ever comes back here, I’m gonna mess him up.” And she meant it. And she could.

Ma was no stranger to violence. Her five brawling brothers all had a healthy respect for their fighting sister. My toughest uncle, Uncle Jack, once asked me, “Do you wanna know the secret to beating your mom in a fistfight?”

“Not really,” I’d said. But he told me anyway. “You gotta fight her like she’s a dude!”

That’s how I knew that Ma was really tough. If my bodybuilding, street-fighting, madman Uncle Jack—the toughest guy I’d ever met—was proud that he could beat my mom in a fistfight, Ma was one tough customer.

On that hot summer day, Paul should have known better than to show up for a face-off with Ma. Maybe that was why he was still sitting there frozen to his steering wheel, car still running.

After watching Paul just sitting there for a minute or so, I decided it was time to do something. I stepped inside the front door and yelled, “Ma! Ma! Paul’s here!”

Ma looked out the front window, and her face erupted in rage. “Paul!” she yelled, cursing and calling him names. Then she desperately started looking around the room, yelling, “Where’s that baseball bat?”

In my five-year-old innocence, I raised my yellow Wiffle bat and said, “Here, Ma!” But she didn’t want the Wiffle bat. She wanted the Louisville Slugger, the real wooden bat that we kept behind the front door in case of intruders.

She grabbed the wooden bat in a flash and dashed outside, down the front steps, and straight toward his car. Curious, I

followed her. I heard more curse words in that twenty-yard run than I'd ever heard in my life.

When she reached the car, Ma raised the baseball bat and began to relentlessly pound Paul's nice new car. She started with the headlights. Then she bashed in his front windshield, took out his driver's side mirror, and started doing body damage, cussing like a sailor with each blow and daring him to get out of the car.

He was still strangely still, almost mannequin-like as he sat there, gripping the steering wheel. No doubt he was wondering, *Should I just drive off, or should I try to stop her?*

Paul should have just driven off. But instead, he made the tactical mistake of getting out of the car. That's when the bat started *really* doing damage. Ma lit him up good. She turned the bat into a battering ram and jammed the top of the bat straight into his nose at full force. His nose exploded like a blood grenade. And then she started beating him relentlessly. Paul screamed with each blow she landed. Although I expected him to hightail it back into his car and speed away, instead he headed toward the house. Petrified, I watched in horror.

Doing his best to dodge Ma's vicious swings, Paul stumbled through the front door, made a beeline for the spot where Ma kept the most recent mail, and grabbed the entire pile—letters, junk mail, everything. Pieces of mail fell to the ground as Ma continued to chase him in the house and back out the front door.

Paul had come for the tax return check. And although he'd managed to retrieve it on that fateful Saturday, a few days later Ma had my uncle Bob track Paul down and forcibly collect it from him. To Ma's great satisfaction, Uncle Bob reported with a smile on his face that Paul was still black and blue from Ma's beating.

Ma slipped Uncle Bob a hard-earned hundred-dollar bill for his trouble.

There are certain memories that are seared in your mind with the hot iron of adrenaline and fear. The sight of Ma walking back up that sidewalk with a splintered, bloodied bat in one hand and a cigarette still hanging out of her mouth is one I'll never forget.

Paul wasn't the first man who had disrespected Ma and triggered a volcanic eruption of the Hulk-like rage that simmered just beneath the surface. She had a long history of looking for love in all the wrong places. By the time I was five, she had already been married a few times and had been with many men.

Ma loved to party. She worked hard during the day and partied hard at night. Friday nights, and sometimes Saturday nights, she'd go dancing at the Shangri La, leaving me and my big brother at home alone.

Doug and I would not wait up for her because she would usually come home after one or two in the morning. She told me once that her favorite dance partner was a member of the mob. He was so strong, he could lift her to the ceiling with one hand. According to Ma, “He was a monster in the streets but Fred Astaire on the dance floor.”

Ma's hard partying resulted in a long string of short-term relationships that inevitably ended badly. Whenever the newest guy left her, or cheated on her, or put her down, she reacted violently because she felt disrespected.

“All men are jerks!” she would say after each breakup.

“But Ma,” I would reply, “I'm going to grow up to be a man. I won't be a jerk.”

“You’re right! You won’t grow up to be jerk. I won’t take no disrespect from my boys.”

And she didn’t. Like many parents of her day, Ma firmly believed in using corporal punishment, especially when we were disrespectful to her. You didn’t need to dare her to discipline. It was second nature to her. Ma often delivered her spankings with a flare all her own.

Once I saw Paul take his beating at her hands, Ma’s rage-o-meter left me wondering when she might explode next. I knew I didn’t want to be within slapping distance when she blew.

In one memorable instance, it was my brother, Doug, who set off Ma’s temper.

Once in a great while, Ma would scrape enough money together to take my brother and me out to a sit-down restaurant. One of her favorite places was a family-friendly, dingy little diner just off Federal Boulevard called Chuck Wagon.

That particular day, my brother ordered a larger, more expensive meal than normal. This made Ma a little mad to begin with. Then suddenly, he wasn’t hungry. This made her even madder.

She bluntly commanded him, “You eat all of your food, Doug. Don’t just sit there and look at it.” Ma was serious. We didn’t eat out often, and when we did, she wanted every last scrap of food cleaned off our plates.

While I was only five, my brother was twelve years old, and he was feeling his about-to-be-a-teenager rebellious streak.

“Well, I’m not hungry anymore!” Doug exclaimed.

She leaned over to him, which was never a good sign, and said in her deep, raspy smoker’s voice, “Listen to me, boy. You’re going to eat every scrap of food on your plate.”

To my surprise, my brother folded his arms and declared, “No, I’m not. I’m not hungry.”

Ma never threatened; she prophesied. She leaned in even closer and declared, “If you don’t start eating your food right now, I’m going to take you outside to the middle of the street and beat your bare bottom in front of God and everyone.”

All during this time, I was quietly eating my food, watching the action. This was better than sitting in Ma’s red Pinto watching cops fight criminals on Friday night, which we sometimes did for entertainment. But I didn’t have to wonder who would win this showdown. I was just waiting to see if Doug would cave and obey in time to save his hide.

But Doug doubled down. He clenched his jaw and said between gritted teeth, “You will not.”

In a flash, Ma jumped up from her chair and grabbed him by the arm. Then, with Doug screaming every step of the way, she dragged him outside. I just sat in my chair, eating my food—all of it. Five minutes later Doug came back in, tears streaming down his face. He sat down and quietly ate all his food too.

Later that day, Doug told me what happened. Ma had taken him outside, dragged him over to the median in the middle of the street, tore down his pants and underwear, and beat his bare bottom with her hand . . . in front of God and everyone.

Prophecy fulfilled.

He also added a juicy tidbit that made me wish I’d followed them outside to watch the action. During his public spanking, a lady who saw what was going on pulled her car over, got out, and marched up to Ma to try to stop her. When she got a few feet away, Ma looked up from the spanking and growled at the



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well-meaning woman, “Lady, if you come one step closer, I’ll pull down your pants and spank you, too.”

And Ma would have.

The lady pivoted back to her car, got in, and drove away.

Today, my mom would have been jailed for pulling such a stunt, and my brother and I would have been sent to child protective services. But back in the early ’70s, laws weren’t so rigorously enforced, especially in our part of the city.

Between the swinging baseball bat and the public spanking, I knew to stay on Ma’s good side. I’d seen her other side enough times to know I never wanted to be the object of her rage.

Ma had felt disrespected by men all her life, and she refused to be disrespected by her own sons. Of course, we knew that she loved us deeply, but this love was always tempered by a fuse so short it could smash noses, break driver’s side mirrors, and leave bare bottoms red.

As a little kid, I sometimes wondered why she was so angry. And I also wondered why she would cry so often. Ma would frequently start crying before I went off to bed. With tears streaming down her face, she’d look at me or Doug and say, “I don’t want you to end up being a bum like me!”

Night after night, whenever she began to cry, I would stand by her side, pat her back, and say, “Ma, I won’t be a bum. Neither will Doug. And you’re not a bum either.”

But night after night she’d shake her head in protest and declare between sobs, “You have no idea the things I’ve done. I’m a bum. I’m a bum!”

When Ma cried, it was no quiet whimper. She would cry as loud as she’d curse. Ma was angry, and she was hurt. It wasn’t just disrespect that fueled her rage. It was also guilt and shame.

“A BUM LIKE ME”

As her nightly tears attested, Ma continually beat up on herself as much as or more than she beat up on those around her who lit her fuse.

Every tear she shed and every punch she threw came from a place of deep hurt and regret. When men disrespected her, they were simply pouring gasoline on the burning shame she already felt. She already thought she was a bum, and their mistreatment of her fanned that inner flame into a raging forest fire.