**FISHERS**

**OF**

**MEN**

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ROBERT

GLENN

FOR

THE

HEARTS

AND

SOULS

OF

MEN

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**BY**

**ROBERT GLENN**

**AMAZON KINDLE DIRECT PUBLISHING**

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**Acknowledgements**

**Thank you to all my family members for your unwavering support.**

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

# **Locking Arms in Friendship**

**Oh, to be young. This is the prime time to initiate a friendship which may perpetually grow and mature over a lifetime. Jason and I maximized our longtime friendship from this precise type of meeting, because our parents lived right across the street from each other. Jason and I have literally grown up together.**

**My name is Vincent Brunola. I have one older brother Marco, and Jason is my best friend; we couldn’t have been closer if we were blood brothers. Being young and full of energy is the only game plan required for a relationship to ignite and grow.**

**We had a lot in common during our youth and spent many hours playing catch. I can’t remember a single day in which we or our families didn’t do something together. If it wasn’t baseball, we were playing board-games, cards, or sharing a meal.**

**It’s hard to put into words, however the structure of our days back then added a real sense of peace, comfort and stability to my life. Laughter and a real sense of extended family permeated through both of our households. Those years of innocence and nonstop fun seemed to pass by to quickly for me.**

**Maybe I’m not quite as young now as I used to be, but young enough to remember all the excitement and turmoil I’ve been through growing up in Dormont, a suburb of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.**

**I’m now a little older and ready to start my freshman year at Penn State.**

**Well okay, let me rethink this whole age thing again. I guess most of you would agree I’m still young; but I’m not as innocent as I used to be in public school.**

**I want to share a story with you before I head off to college. In part it’s my story, but mostly it’s about my very best friend, Jason.**

**He’s too shy and laidback or I’m sure he would have told you the story himself. Our story unfolds in the late summer of 1983 in Pittsburgh. Jason and I were both fourteen years old at the time. I’m sure you won’t have any difficulty with this simple math problem; it’s now 1987.**

**Pittsburgh is like many major cities in our country; the 1980s had so far proven them-selves to be a battlefield between tradition and nonconformity. Communication between parents and us kids was described as being a manifestation of a “generation gap”. At best this term is a diluted attempt to characterize a more complicated struggle ensuing within family structures.**

**Can you tell my major at Penn State will be Sociology? You hit the nail right on the head.**

**Looking back, I can see our parents loved us very much; they called young people in general our nation’s future and our most valuable resource. But how do societies evolve into what they have become? I wanted to know more before I started a family of my own, hence the study of Sociology.**

**It’s not just the success or failure of one family unit which defines society at large. For each parent only has a direct influence on their own family unit. Yet there still are connections between family units and the ensuing spiral up to the grand scale of society. And conversely there is also a reciprocal correlation between society at large and the ensuing levels down to an individual family unit.**

**Each produces as well as disburses different and unique qualities of behavior and overall conduct. So, which one carries the most influence over the other? Maybe my professors at Penn State will be able to help me figure out a plausible solution.**

**I do know for kids the growing up process is full of questions and answers, and I can tell you first handed it’s not easy being a kid.**

**The ensuing story finds both Jason and I encrusted in the middle of our family’s journeys. Perhaps entrenched is a better descriptive term. I’ll leave the final choice of adjectives here up to you.**

**Jason and I would often talk with each other and compare our unique family characteristics. I always envied Jason’s parents for being so level-headed. And Jason, well he frequently mentioned he felt I and my dad seemed closer than he felt to his dad.**

**I guess it just goes to show you no one is perfect. Individual perceptions may easily misrepresent reality when we start comparing ourselves to others. Forgiveness and compassion are cementing agents which help tie things together and relax wild emotions.**

**Family dynamics are complicated. Whether it be consciously or unconsciously, patience is always required. Somehow the summer of 1983 turned out to be more stressful for Jason and his dad than I thought. I was a little worried about Jason because he wasn’t acting like himself anymore, and I was at a loss as to how I could help him.**

**My curiosity hit a high point early one Sunday morning as I was chilling out in my bedroom. I thought I saw a car pull into the McGivney’s driveway. But given the brevity of my glance, I couldn’t make out who it was.**

**Unbeknownst to me, Jason was going through a tough time.**

**This was to be a weekend I will never forget, and it all began unraveling when my phone rang a few minutes later and it was Jason on the line.**

**“Hello Vince… it’s me, you won’t believe what I’m going through with my dad.”**

**“Are you at home now? Are you okay?” I questioned Jason as I moved closer to the window, propped up my elbows on a pillow which rested on my lap, and looked towards Jason’s house with anticipation.**

**My bedroom was on the street-side of our house and Jason’s room faced into his own backyard, but with all the trees in both of our yards, one could barely see a small portion of each-others house anyway. It was comforting just knowing my best friend was near.**

**“Yes, I’m home, but I’m not so sure I would say okay.” Jason excitedly replied. “I’m up in my room and no one can hear us. My parents are somewhere downstairs.”**

**I was intrigued by the energy level I sensed in Jason’s voice.**

**“I saw you leave yesterday morning. I didn’t know you were going anywhere,” Vince spilled out.**

**“Neither did I Vince; my dad surprised me with a fishing trip. But that’s not why I’m calling you,” Jason replied as he produced an audible swallow.**

**“Vince… hold on you’re never going to believe this.” Jason started to explain, “I think my dad is losing it!”**

**“Losing what?” Vince broke in.**

**“Well… it’s hard to say.” Jason stumbled through a myriad of thoughts. “Well he’s not the dad I thought he was.”**

**“What? What are you saying?” With a raised voice I surmised: “He’s not your dad?”**

**Jason jumped back in, “No, no, no, Vince…he’s my dad alright. I didn’t mean it that way. He’s just not the dad I thought he was.”**

**I was getting lost. “Jason you’re confusing me. What are you talking about?”**

**Jason attempted to clarify, “My dad is a shy laidback guy. Oh, he can be fun, but mostly he’s the serious minded -that all makes complete sense to me- kind of a character I can always figure out. You Know?”**

**“Yeah,” I sympathized, “that sounds like my dad along with a half-dozen of the other dads on our block.”**

**“Vince that’s what I thought too,” Jason smiled in agreement. And then Jason’s tone of voice flattened out as he completed his thought, “But that’s not my dad anymore!”**

**“Jason, now you really have my attention. What happened in the last twenty-four hours that has you so worked up? Come on, tell me what’s going on!”**

**Jason mumbled in disbelief, “I don’t think I can tell you.”**

**I couldn’t believe my ears, “What do mean you can’t tell me?”**

**“Well, I simply don’t know yet.” Jason soberly responded.**

**“You don’t know… what?” I spat out in frustration.**

**“Well, my dad started to open up to me yesterday by telling me he got into trouble with the law when he was a teenager.” Jason explained.**

**“Jason, does this have anything to do with the mall on Friday?” I was really starting to panic.**

**“Yes, Vince.” Jason confessed, “I got caught and my dad had to come down to the Police Station to get me! You all were running so far ahead of me you didn’t even notice.”**

**“Jason!” I rudely responded and cut him off.**

**“Vince, hold on.” Jason broke back into the dialog, “Before you say anything else, no… I didn’t rat on you or any of the other guys.”**

**“I don’t know if that really matters Jason.” I anxiously replied, “you know my dad and your dad are best friends. They grew up together over in Beechview as best buddies.”**

**“Yes, I know, but don’t worry about that.” Jason responded with a cool head. “Somehow I don’t think my dad will say anything. He’s too spaced out about something else.”**

**Our dads, Sam and Jeff, were close from early boyhood. And after Jason’s parents, Jeff and Maggie, were married it was my dad who let them know the house across the street from ours was for sale.**

**“Jason, did you get detention?” I exploded in a horrible panic.**

**With an uncanny amount of composure Jason responded, “I thought a harsh punishment was very close and it still may be, but nothing like that has happened yet.**

**My dad took me fishing up at our family spot on Lake Erie and he began by talking about his youth. But then, Vince, when we woke up this morning, he was very upset about something else, and we simply packed up and came home.**

**I don’t know what happened during the night or why. Somehow, I’ve got to find out what happened to my dad during the night.”**

**We continued our conversation for a little while, but no conclusive results developed to explain Jason’s current dilemma.**

**Just like our fathers, it was easy to see Jason and I were very close. We played together as preschoolers and we managed to be in the same classes at school. Baseball was our favorite sport. Many an hour were spent fielding and catching baseballs at the local ball field three blocks away. We were for the most part very good kids in my estimation.**

**As a matter of fact, there were many families on our block who spent a good deal of time together especially during the summer months, not to mention on some major holidays as well. In the early 1980s many neighbors still looked out for one another.**

**The City of Pittsburgh, in general, rallied behind all three of their major league teams: the Steelers of the NFL, the Penguins of the NHL, and the Pirates of Major League Baseball. Baseball not only was but still is our favorite sport. There seemed to be a sport themed block party going on year ‘round on someone’s block.**

**Neighborhoods throughout the area were tight knit communities.**

**“Vince, I have to go now!” Jason said raising his voice to regain control of our conversation. “My dad has left the house. I see him out back trying to put a fire together in our pit. I have to go and check it out.”**

**“But Jason,” I broke in yet another time.**

**“Bye Vince, I’ll get back to you later… promise.” Jason hung up the phone in a hurry and headed out through his bedroom door.**

**Jason quickly realized he had left me with a lot of unanswered questions and knew I would want to hear the entire story.**

**Sure enough, I dialed Jason’s number as fast as my fingers could move and heard his phone ringing, but Jason was already making his way down the staircase.**

**Jason ignored the continued ringing but slowed down his pace to begin recalling the events of the last forty-eight hours. It wasn’t easy because so much had happened and not much of it even made sense to him yet. His thoughts became garbled.**

**Jason was then down the staircase and heading through the hall. The hall ended at their kitchen and a view of the backyard also came into Jason’s sight through a sliding patio door. Jason abruptly stopped in his tracks.**

**One more step and he would be in the kitchen. His mom and three-year-old sisters were completing a snack-time.**

**Jason’s heart began to pump harder and he could hear the increased pressure pulsating against his eardrums.**

**“What am I doing?” Jason’s thoughts turned to his dad, “Remember the look on Pop’s face? And my mom will see me if I step into the kitchen. I’m not ready to be engaged by both of my parents. Vince was right. I’m walking towards the worst punishment talk of my life; I can’t do this.”**

**Well Jason just stood there for a while with his back against the wall. His dad was still in the backyard and his mom unexpectedly moved his younger sisters from the kitchen into the family room. Jason could hear all three of them begin setting up a game to play.**

**Jason felt this was his chance to make a move. He took a deep breath and began to meticulously piece together every precise detail he could rummage up to the front of his brain. His thoughts took him back to the mall on Friday afternoon for a brief moment. Jason was running as fast as he could.**

**“Why is this happening?” Jason thought in a panic, “The guards are all after me. Why don’t they go chase someone else?”**

**“Oh, got you with the goods,” a guard huffed and puffed as he grabbed Jason’s collar. Then he shouted, “Harry… you reach the police yet? I’ve got one of them.”**

**“Yeah they’re on the way over,” Harry replied.**

**It didn’t seem to be more than a few minutes in Jason’s head before he was at the police station, and his dad was walking in the door all sweaty. Mr. McGivney had a weird look in his eyes.**

**Jason stopped his thought process right at that spot with a quick jerk of his head and exhaled one large breath through his nostrils as he returned to the awkward silence in his hallway.**

**Oh, he was concerned about what he had done and why he was seated at the Police station, but Jason was now far more concerned about his dad’s response; his odd behavior.**

**Why wasn’t his dad simply getting mad at him for messing up?**

**Jason knew he deserved a punishment, but none had come. Why? What was his dad thinking?**

**Too many questions were running through Jason’s head, but no answers. From what little he had learned from his dad on Saturday, Jason knew his dad had some sort of secret.**

**As a result of this revelation, Jason felt he wasn’t just one step from entering the kitchen, or from approaching his dad in the backyard. He was now one step away from turning a page in time to reveal the secret his dad was so reluctant to share; a secret which for Jason was going to be beyond his wildest dreams.**

**Jason puckered up his lips to produce an intense look on his face and pushed off from his resting place against the wall. Then in a moment of abandonment he took his first step towards the back yard.**

# **CHAPTER TWO**

# **Realities & Expectations**

**Well I guess before I go on any further, I better back up a little to set my story on solid ground. Jason is always telling me I get my cart before the horse; I throw the baseball before I’ve really eyed the target; or pulled the pop-tart out of the toaster before it’s really hot. Sorry my friend, I really am trying to do better.**

**I only need to go back two days, from Sunday to Friday, for a few brief moments. That’s when things all started to fall apart. To my recollection, Friday August 14th, 1983 was a sultry afternoon.**

**A phone call from the police had primed Mr. McGivney’s thoughts into areas he had never imagined. Our son, how could he have ever done this? But he did it; they caught him red-handed.**

**Mr. McGivney’s thoughts fixated on the miniscule possibility, “Was history in the process of repeating itself? Oh, how could it? That’s ridiculous.” How was he going to handle this?**

**Mr. McGivney had only momentarily entered the station with a police report in hand and was all sweaty.**

**Jason felt weighted down with a heavy load of discomfort as he sat in an old hardwood chair at the Dormont Police Station and glanced over at his dad.**

**His dad couldn’t bring himself to look at his son just then but gazed straight out of the first story window at the heat waves rising off the asphalt street. His mind wandered off in this awkward moment.**

**Mr. McGivney knew his life had many twists and turns, and yet their family hopes remained in tack. Their son, Jason, is all boy; in and out of trouble at the drop of a base-ball cap.**

**A typical day normally brings good memories which draw the family closer together. Mr. & Mrs. McGivney love all three of their children and nurture their development with a passion which wasn’t necessarily as apparent in their own upbringing.**

**But today though isn’t one of those typical days. Mr. McGivney’s thoughts refocused from his stare out the window of the police complex onto Jason, the room and the police officers.**

**The building is nearly one-hundred years old with thick plaster walls and hardwood floors looking like they have seen better days. Musty might also be an appropriate adjective for the old room they were meeting in.**

**Mr. McGivney felt like he was in an emotional train wreck. He kept looking around the room franticly searching for words to express him-self. Repeatedly his eyes flashed back to his son who couldn’t take his eyes off the old floor. You could actually feel the discomfort and anxiety in the air hovering around both father and son.**

**Jason finally managed to glance over at his father’s disappointed expression and felt confusion, anger, and sadness all mixed together in one newly concocted emotion. What had he done? His Pop has had disappointed looks on his face before, but none that ever looked like this.**

**“What’s that look for?” Jason blurted out.**

**“I don’t understand you!” Jeff snapped back. “What were you thinking? The police report here says you shop-lifted an item at the mall! Why?”**

**“Why not,” Jason returned in a like tone.**

**“Why not… Why? You can buy anything you need,” Jeff expelled in one breath. “Why steal, son?”**

**Jeff had many other thoughts running through his head in rapid succession but couldn’t verbalize a single one of them at the moment.**

**Jason held his breath for an instant as his lips puckered in tightly and then simply responded: “Cause!”**

**Jason too had many thoughts, none of which had any communication value to lighten the intensity in the air, nor the uncomfortable feeling he had in his stomach.**

**The late afternoon sun blazing in through the window on the back of Jeff’s neck, only contributed to his discomfort. And the piercing stares of the police Sargent didn’t help either.**

**“Okay son, let’s go home and we’ll talk about this more later.” Jeff announced with a disheartened tone and then remembered the officers in the room.**

**“I’m sorry Sargent for all of this and thank you for your help. We will do our best to not have any repeat visits.” Jeff concluded his thought as he finally raised his eyes to then face the Sargent straight on.**

**Then upon a quick reflection he reluctantly added, “Are… we okay to go now?”**

**“Yes Sir, you may go.” The Sargent slowly replied in a languid tone. He had seen far too many cases like this one in recent weeks.**

**Jeff stood up and then turned to face his son. “Do you have anything to say Jason?” Jeff continued with a foreboding tone.**

**With head and eyes lowered Jason merely mumbled: “Sorry.”**

**One could clearly hear the irritating and repetitive shuffles of the chairs on the hardwood floor and the echoing sounds of many footsteps as everyone silently and purposefully began clearing the old room.**

**Jason gave a sigh of relief as he was now able to move around and could begin to put all of this behind him. Then he looked up at his dad to realize there was no visible sign of relief in his dad’s expression.**

**It was a long and quiet ride home for father and son, but both their brains were operating in over-drive. One thought overlapped another and yet another to the point which neither person could manage to utter a sound.**

**For Jeff, he just didn’t know how he was going to tell Maggie about what just happened but knew her feelings would at least match his own. And Jason’s thoughts focused around the theme of “they don’t understand”.**

**The sounds of a hot summer breeze rushing by the open car windows were magnified to an unnatural level, intensifying the awkward silence as they drove on.**

**The heat normally isn’t so bad for a day or so, but this summer has been long, hot, and humid. Breathing becomes a constant effort with the humidity soring day after day in the Pittsburgh area. Each day seemed to drag on in misery and boredom.**

**Tempers can easily erupt as the hours redundantly tick away and the body needs, even craves, for any cooling relief it can find. Jeff and his son might have been caught up in this conundrum of weather events. Or perhaps their strained relationship was more connected with Jeff’s lack of understanding concerning his son’s teenage state of mind. Whatever the cause, Jeff was concerned.**

**Jason and his family have always lived in the South Hills of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And they appeared to their friends and neighbors to be coping the best they could under the circumstances.**

**Oh, they’re not unlike many families in Pittsburgh or for that matter most families you may encounter in any major city, in any country.**

**They seek to maintain a healthy, happy, and safe environment for their family and look with anticipation to what life has in store for them.**

**Maggie and Jeff McGivney have known each other for most of their lives although it took many years before Mr. McGivney realized his deep love for her. Mrs. McGivney, well she is a true romantic at heart. She had deep feelings for her husband very soon after they first met.**

**It’s a little awkward at times and yet wonderful how women mature before we men do. Women have a way of cultivating responsibility in a man.**

**After a somewhat turbulent beginning, their joyful day came on July 14, 1964 with the jubilant ringing of wedding bells as they married soon after college. Their son Jason, my buddy, was born five years later, two months my senior. Just within the last three years their home has also been blessed with a beautiful set of twin girls.**

**Mr. McGivney now works for a progressive computer technology firm and his wife works in her uncle’s restaurant on the South Side of Pittsburgh as a cook, accountant, and over-all manager of daily operations.**

**Well, the McGivney’s SUV finally made its’ way into their driveway. Jason exited the vehicle even before his dad had turned the motor off and headed straight into the house to chill out in his bedroom.**

**Jeff hesitated for a moment with his forehead pressed against the stirring wheel, and then turned the motor off to go indoors and locate his wife. Maggie did take the news hard and cried for a half hour in their bedroom.**

**Up in his room, Jason thought about giving me a call, but then quickly put the phone back down on its’ cradle. Jason quickly rationalized: What if Vince’s parents already know? They might pick up his phone and that would be very awkward.**

**And meanwhile I had seen the McGivney’s vehicle pull in the driveway and I was sitting anxiously in my room, staring at my phone. The pressure to call Jason was intense, but then I was also paralyzed to think one of Jason’s parents might take my call. As a result, we both languished in the moment.**

**As the hours passed that Friday evening, the silence unfortunately continued for all. I couldn’t even talk to my folks, because, if I did, I would have to confess my participation in the mall caper. My dad asked me once if I was okay and I simply lied to him and responded: yeah. I think he didn’t really believe me but ended the questioning right there.**

**At Jason’s house the silence was only broken by an occasional one or two-word response to mundane comments or questions between Jason and his parents. If it hadn’t been for the input of Jason’s preschool twin sisters, the mood would have been even more unbearable. Both girls were oblivious to the confrontation going on around them, which is a typical three-year-old response.**

**Well the evening did eventually draw to a close. Jason felt so uncomfortable about how the evening went he simply withdrew to his room. Maggie and Jeff had the twins in bed by eight-thirty and then by 10 P.M. they prepared for bed in relative silence. After they reclined the awkwardness, at least for them, was momentarily broken.**

**“What are we going to do Jeff?” Maggie sobbed. “You need to tell Jason; you need to talk to him.”**

**“What do you mean I need to tell him?” Retorted Jeff, “What?”**

**“You know, Honey! It’s time. I know you’ve been putting it off for the right moment. I don’t think there could be a better time, do you?” She said to complete her thoughts.**

**“No… Maggie! Not yet; not now! No!”**

**Jeff turned away from Maggie on to his other side and turned the light off on his nightstand. Jeff knew exactly what Maggie was referring to but wouldn’t admit it.**

**Maggie simply shook her head as she rolled over on her side and slowly turned off the light on her nightstand. A single tear rolled off her cheek onto the pillow as she closed her eyes.**

**No one slept well that night, including Jason. He left the curtain on his window open and stared out at the stars for hours. Why did he go along with the other guys? It would have been so easy to say no, but it wasn’t easy at all. He felt it was only a choice between either following along or facing rejection. Why does it have to be like this?**

**Meanwhile Jason’s dad wasn’t doing any better. Jeff was in and out of sleep about every two hours. He finally relinquished his own tumbling thought pattern to accept the fact that Maggie was right, and he needed to talk with Jason. Jason is so much like me, thought Jeff. He is only fourteen, but Jeff could see Jason’s teen years looking more and more like his own.**

**Jeff had been a very confused young man and over-all had a sad teenage experience. He didn’t want Jason to travel anywhere near that road.**

**But what could he say? What could Jeff possibly say to his son, which would make a lasting and profound difference in Jason’s life?**

**Maybe it was time for the truth to be told. Oh, Jeff had never really lied to his son, but he did avoid telling him about his past.**

**Jeff’s life as a teenager was not to be bragged on and was only discussed among those who knew him during those tough years. Whether or not Jason was old enough to really understand wasn’t even a topic for discussion in Jeff’s head now. It appeared to be his only course of action.**

**The next morning, Saturday, began in the same quiet tones which had prevailed last evening, and the silence was too much for Jeff.**

**“Jason, are you up in your room?” Jeff called from the base of their staircase in the entryway. His voice exploded more than he intended along with a vocal crack.**

**“Yeah,” Jason shouted back with his head poking out into the hallway.**

**“Will you come downstairs? I want to talk with you, son.” Jeff managed to regain vocal control.**

**Jason was already halfway down the staircase. “Sure Pop. What do you want?” He nervously questioned.**

**“I want to talk about yesterday. I want to share some stuff which won’t be easy for me, but I think it’s time.”**

**Jeff unintentionally paused as they walked out of the entryway and he settled into his favorite chair near the fireplace.**

**Jason on the other hand simply selected the first chair he came to.**

**“Pop, just forget about yesterday…it won’t…”**

**“Son” Jeff interrupted. “It matters to me and it’s not something I can lay aside for your sake, as well as for mine. You don’t know how much we are alike.”**

**Jeff stopped short, out of a nervous feeling which crept over his body. He quickly stood, turned away from Jason and stared out of the window in front of him. Was this the time to say something? Once said, there would be no way to take the words back. This was something Jeff had been holding inside for years.**

**He squeezed his eyelids tightly shut, said a quick prayer, and then the dreaded words began to pour out.**

**“Between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, I was in and out of juvenile hall and jail more times than I can remember,” Jeff forced out.**

**The words seemed to echo in his ears as if spoken through a stadium broadcasting system.**

**“Pop?” Jason emotionally exploded from his seat near the hallway entrance. “You’re joking! Aren’t you?”**

**Turning back to face his son, Jeff continued. “No son. I never have tried to give you the impression I’m perfect or anything close to it, but I’ve tried to be the best dad I could.”**

**“Pop?” Jason stumbled through his thoughts never imagining his dad could utter such words or have indeed lived such a life.**

**He had an older friend in juvenile hall now and knew why he was there. But, his dad…no way!**

**“Son, I was going to wait until you were a little older to tell you my story, but I’ve decided I’ll do it now.” Jeff took in a big slow breath and let it out in a similar manner as he moved back to his chair.**

**He had a very sad childhood with parents Jeff truly felt didn’t love or care for him. The teenage years were unbearable, and Jeff found himself in and out of jail on a regular basis. The loneliness of it all was unbelievable and the only person he felt he could possibly talk to was his grandfather or Papa as Jeff called him.**

**“Papa, your great-grandfather, was my strongest supporter, though for a while I wasn’t very nice to him. Once, when I was eighteen years old and had just got released from jail, Papa came to visit me. He said he loved me very much and I called him an old foolish man and ran out of the apartment. I told Papa to stay away from me.” Jeff felt a tear running down his cheek.**

**“I…I couldn’t believe anyone could love me at that time in my life.” Wiping the tear away, “I was hurting pretty bad Jason, but Papa wouldn’t give up on me. For weeks he would come by and tried to talk with me.”**

**Jason’s mind began to settle down as he moved to an armchair opposite his dad.**

**“You see son, it wasn’t that I didn’t really want to talk with Papa; I was struggling and didn’t want to confess to him what was really troubling me at the time.” Jeff paused once more for a brief moment because he was still un-sure he should visit his true confession so quickly with Jason.**

**Jason, however, was now totally into this. He had never seen his dad open up like this with such candor.**

**Jeff knew this wasn’t going to be easy nor would it be a short conversation.**

**Jeff significantly raised his voice, “Maggie?” and Jason was a little startled.**

**“Yes, Honey!” Maggie replied from upstairs in the girl’s room.**

**“Jason and I are going to grab our fishing gear and go out for the day. Okay?” The words just spilled out of Jeff’s mouth as the idea had formed.**

**“We’ll say good-by to you and the girls before we leave.”**

**Maggie gave an audible sigh of relief as she returned her husband’s comment with another “Okay”.**

**“You up for a fishing trip Son?” Jeff asked looking him straight in the eyes.**

**Jason merely replied with a contorted half-smile and a short single nod of his head.**

# **CHAPTER THREE**

# **On the Fly – Fishing**

**It wasn’t too long before Jason and his dad were packed and ready to locate their favorite fishing spot. Unbeknownst to Jason, Jeff had thrown in the tent, sleeping bags, as well as any other camping gear he could easily locate into the rear of their SUV.**

**“Pop, you sure have a lot of gear back there for a day trip.” Jason exclaimed upon seeing all the equipment.**

**Jeff smiled, “You can never tell what the day will bring son. This Saturday trip just might turn into a full weekend outing. Are you all packed?”**

**“Yes sir, I’m ready” Jason smirked nervously.**

**“Okay, let’s go find your mom and sisters, and say good-by.” Jeff concluded.**

**So with all the hugs and kisses behind them, they walked out of the house one last time to begin their journey.**

**Jason was a little nervous as his dad backed out of the driveway. What was this Saturday morning going to reveal? His dad was acting very much out of character, yet Jason was anxious to hear his story.**

**Jason sat in the front passenger seat and caught a glimpse of his good buddy, Vince, that’s me. I was looking down from my second story bedroom window across the street. Jason gave me a nod of his head accompanied by a quick army salute as he and his dad drove down the block. Jason’s eyes were fixed on my window until we lost visual contact behind all the trees.**

**“I take it that Vince is up already,” Jeff said noticing Jason’s greeting. “I hope I haven’t spoiled any plans you two may have had for today.”**

**“No Pop, it’s okay,” Jason replied. “We were only going to play catch later down at the field. Vince will understand.”**

**So, with their mutual acknowledgements of agreement, Jeff turned right at the corner and accelerated down the main street.**

**Pittsburgh isn’t built on a grid system, so until you’ve lived there for a while a map is a great idea. However, being a born native of Pittsburgh as Jeff is, he had no need of a map. The McGivney’s SUV efficiently meandered through the local street network to the nearest interstate connection.**

**Then they headed north on Interstate 79 out of the Pittsburgh area. Their destination was a little beach-front state park about twenty minutes west of Erie, Pennsylvania.**

**They had one special fishing spot ideally located on a wide peninsula which jetted into Lake Erie about two hundred yards. Jeff had taken Maggie and the kids there on a number of weekend camping trips.**

**The drive normally took them about three-and-a-half hours. Jason was anxious to hear more of his dad’s story however Jeff kept cautiously quiet during the drive up to Lake Erie. The only conversations during the drive were limited to observations concerning interesting structures they saw along the way and animal sightings.**

**Each mile they drove changed their everyday urban setting to a rural one and then seemingly without notice, it turned into wilderness. They would soon be closing in on their destination.**

**Jeff’s mind was racing all over the place trying to organize his thoughts into any order which could possibly make sense to Jason.**

**For a while his thoughts simply drifted. Jeff thought about the old saying: “Children should be seen, but not heard.” And the saying stuck in his mind, just like a song lyric or tune can get stuck; and it seemed to go ‘round-n-round in his head like an uncontrollable form of torture.**

**“Children should be seen, but not heard,” Jeff whispered under his breath.**

**For whatever reason that was how he felt his parents had raised him. Oh, it was a common thought Jeff supposed for their generation. After all, it was then the economic boom after WW II.**

**The men and women who had served in the war had been through many situations which changed them. The young who entered the war in relative innocence returned with grateful hearts they had survived; now they felt there was nothing to hold back their dreams from coming true. And they learned to dream big.**

**New inventions and technology were being made available to the masses. But when it came to family life, Jeff had never been able to figure out what was wrong with his parent’s approach to raising children.**

**Then as a result of all this concentrated effort, the meaning of the phrase just hit him. Or at least it was a meaning meant for the moment, Jeff wasn’t totally sure at this point in his thought process.**

**“… Be seen, but not heard?” Jeff repeated his thought.**

**That’s the way I feel about my furniture (my stuff). Wow, is that how my parents felt about me? Did my parents feel it was good enough to take care of me by putting food on the table? So, did they feel they could talk to and have fun with their adult friends, but simply couldn’t relate to a child? What, so… they didn’t try? Did my parents rationalize their behavior as: Love?**

**With a sigh, Jeff thought on: I don’t know; they both passed away years ago and this topic can’t be revisited with them. But still it seems to be an issue I’ll need to look into further for my own sake.**

**All these thoughts did provide Jeff with the comfort he didn’t feel the same way about their children. Both he and Maggie loved their kids and tried their best to express love in ways the children could understand. But still Jeff didn’t know exactly how he was going to express his thoughts and feelings to Jason about the mess he had made of his own young life.**

**Jason just sat there during all this silence. He hadn’t ever seen his dad act so strangely. He couldn’t help but think his dad was building up the suspense to boldly announce the lavish punishment he would receive for ending up at the Police Station yesterday.**

**They arrived at the lake far too quickly for Jeff’s liking, and set up camp. Soon the lines were baited and in the water. It turned out to be a beautiful afternoon. An occasional puffy cloud was all that could be seen in the sky, all the way to the horizon.**

**The heat index was already building up pretty high, but the coolness of the breeze off the lake removed any sting from the day’s heat. All they needed to do was remain close to the water’s edge.**

**“Pop… Pop,” Jason said hesitantly, “There’s a pull on your line.”**

**Jeff merely gave Jason a funny half-smile, reeled in the fish, put it into a pail, rebated his line, and cast it back into the water.**

**Jason didn’t know how to respond. His dad was so distant and wondered what was brewing in his dad’s head. Something had to explode sooner or later.**

**Jeff, however, seemed to remain in his own little world. He thought; there is nothing more calming and peaceful than sitting on the edge of a lake with a cool gentle breeze against my face. Watching the rippling water can be as soothing as watching the everchanging dance of a crackling campfire.**

**Actually, those thoughts were merely a cover up. Jeff was anything but soothed or calm inside. He had never thought confessing to his son was going to be this hard. Jeff was consumed in an unusual void which hindered his organization skills and he truly didn’t know how to reveal his past to Jason.**

**The silence needed to come to an end, and it was Jason who mustered up enough courage to break the ice.**

**“Well Pop, what happened?” Jason couldn’t wait any longer and gave his dad a gentle nudge in the arm with his elbow.**

**Jeff’s eyes quickly moved from the water over to Jason. With yet another nervous half-cocked smile and an awkward short laugh, Jeff attempted to respond.**

**“I still don’t know how to begin Son. Oh, I’ll tell you all of the stuff which placed me in the juvenile system. But those things were all openly known by my friends and by then, my parents too.**

**The real cause of my deep distress was something I hadn’t shared with anyone and I felt I couldn’t share, because I thought I was truly going crazy. I was losing my sanity!”**

**Jeff made but short pause and continued, “Jason… I was having a whole mess of unexplainable dreams which had nothing to do with my daily life. They were clearly not from the events of the day nor anything I had eaten. I was scared to tell you the truth Jason and had no one to talk to; no one understood me!”**

**Jason chuckled after his dad’s confession, “I think I can relate to you on that point, Pop.”**

**Jeff smiled as he continued on, “these dreams had been going on for many months and it was during this time Papa had started to visit me more often. I didn’t trust him any more than I would have trusted my parents, if I had decided to confide in them.**

**But Papa wouldn’t let go. He came back again and again until one afternoon I decided to let it out and Papa in; into my nightmares.**

**I simply couldn’t stand it any longer to not say something to somebody, and Papa kept looking at me with his big saucer eyes and his calming smile. I still wasn’t all that polite with him and thought: Oh well, what can the old fool do to hurt me anyway?”**

**Jason sat in silence trying to stay mentally focused on every word his dad was sharing. It seemed in part like he was sitting next to a total stranger.**

**Jeff however was unaware of his son’s thoughts and simply continued on: “I told Papa the general nature of my dreams and to my surprise he replied: Oh, is that it! I thought to myself: ‘What do you mean? Oh, is that it?’ Like it was no big deal; boy did I make a big mistake confiding in this old man!”**

**“Jason then your great-grandpa gave me a large belly laugh and said he was sorry for the way his response had come out. He began to share about some of his experiences growing up in Pittsburgh, and my feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment began to fade away as we continued to talk.**

**It wasn’t as though I felt he understood or could even help. He simply gave me the feeling he had heard me. That’s all it was Jason. Papa just heard me and was responding back like I was a real person. I wasn’t used to being recognized with such sincerity.**

**The time slipped past and we talked for an unrecorded length of time. Then out of the blue Papa got up, walked over to me and gave me a big bear hug. I didn’t know what to think. It wasn’t a little pat-on-the-back hug; it was a genuine long, sturdy bear hug. And then he whispered in my ear the words I had heard on his other visits: ‘I love you, Jeff.’**

**Jason… for the first time in my life, I actually believed those words had a true meaning, coming from an adult.”**

**Jason just sat there in shock and awe. He couldn’t think of anything appropriate to say, but the emanate thought of punishment for his crime slipped away as his dad continued on.**

**“Before we parted, Papa asked me to hold on a moment as he ran out to his car. He came back with a little waxed sleeve which had a large old leaf pressed and sealed between its yellowing sides. He looked me in the eyes with a broad smile and said it was for me.**

**‘I’m giving you this precious keep-sake.’ Papa said with a crack in his voice. ‘Yes, this old leaf! My mother gave it to me when I was much younger than you are now, and then the leaf was a beautiful green color. She had pinched it off a tree in the middle of our backyard.’**

**She said: ‘I want you to think about the leaf. It holds with-in it the very reason you are here and the key as to why your Dad and I love you so much.’**

**I immediately responded: ‘Tell me Mom!’**

**Well, she merely shook her head back and forth while replying: ‘If I tell you, then it will have no real meaning; you must figure it out for yourself.’ She then leaned over and gave me a kiss on the forehead.**

**This leaf has been a part of me from the very day my mother gave it to me. Take good care of it. And I too want you, Jeff, to ponder the same challenging thoughts my mother gave me. Will you try and do this for me? Papa ended.**

**I’ll try; I told Papa and wondered for a split second which one of us was crazier.”**

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

# **Dream of Desolation**

**Day’s light at Lake Erie was beginning to wane, so without even a pause in his story Jeff began to build a campfire and prepare the fish he and Jason had caught during the course of the afternoon. Today had been anything but a normal Saturday, and both father and son were taking in the day’s events moment by moment.**

**Jason watched his dad skillfully cleaning the catch, but his own thoughts were all over the place. He thought he knew his dad and Jason had pegged him in the same lump with all the other dads in their neighborhood. But now, he honestly didn’t know what to think. Jason was caught totally off-guard by this whole conversation.**

**Conversely, Jeff’s unrelenting rate of speech and the details of the story solidified his conviction. He noticed Jason’s attentive presence, but unconsciously Jeff was really more focused on his own inner peace. He felt a burden being lifted off his shoulders and the result was a real confirmation this was indeed the time to be sharing his story with his son.**

**And somehow, someway Jeff could only pray Jason’s life would be profoundly impacted as a result.**

**Then, with a short but rapid shake of his head, Jeff’s thoughts refocused back onto his continuing story and his thought process over the conversations he had with his grandfather so many years ago.**

**“Well Jason, Papa hadn’t totally won me over to my confidences yet, but I was encouraged to pursue conversations with him.**

**I waited for a week or two as I tossed around the idea of either sharing the actual contents of my dreams with Papa or just forgetting the whole thing. But one day I woke up in a cold sweat and my heartbeat was pumping stronger than normal. I had just had another dream. With little thought, I was dressed and off to Papa’s house.”**

**“Good day.” Papa greeted as Jeff entered his living room. “It’s 2 P.M. and I hope all is well with you, Jeff.”**

**“No, Papa.” Jeff anxiously replied as he took a seat near the only window in the room and stared out into the front yard.**

**Without giving Papa a chance to say anything more, Jeff continued, “I just had another dream!”**

**Papa didn’t make any verbal reply but stopped what he was doing to turn his attention on Jeff. Jeff noticed Papa’s movement and smiled to confirm Papa’s act of support.**

**“I have to tell you Papa these aren’t your normal dreams,” Jeff moved ahead with his story. “Dreams are normally connected to a movie, spicy food, or a memory of some sort, and I normally struggle to even remember a small part of a dream.”**

**Jeff stared straight out the window without blinking and barely paused to take a breath. “I have had many dreams during my long-life Papa, but none like these.”**

**Papa smiled and responded out of a sincere concern. “I’m here for you Jeff. Will you tell me about them?”**

**Jeff continued without any hesitation. “These are weird and unexplainable! For one thing, I remember them. Every one of them in vivid detail; it’s like they’re somehow real and not even dreams at all. They’re like movies playing relentlessly in my head. But I’m in them and I don’t like it!”**

**While Jeff was sharing with Papa, Papa was busily pouring them both a cup of freshly brewed coffee and handed one cup off to Jeff.**

**“Thank you”, Jeff added as he continued his story. “I’m not a morning person Papa you know me, but now I’m afraid to even go to sleep. I stay up just to avoid sleep and end up dozing off anywhere I happen to be in my apartment. Last week I woke up at my kitchen table with my face in a bowl of nachos.”**

**Papa spit out his last gulp of coffee and exploded in a torrent of laughter.**

**“I’ll give you that one Papa. I know it sounds funny, but I didn’t laugh that morning. I was scared and still am, because I don’t know what’s happening to me.”**

**“Do you think you can pick out one dream to share with me?” Papa prodded as he meticulously cleaned up after himself.**

**With a heartfelt sigh, “The first dream was months ago,” Jeff began. “Oh, I’m not one for marking down dates, so I don’t remember the date. But I do remember the dream; just as if it were last night. And the emotions of it are just as vivid in my mind as the morning after I had the dream.**

**It began with an intense light shrouded in a dense fog. I’m surprised the light didn’t wake me up, it was so bright. But soon the light and fog gave way to reveal a crowded old middle eastern plaza packed with people going about their business and there I was.**

**It was a wonderfully colored marketplace with beautifully made tapestries and brilliant awnings covering many merchant stands. The aroma from the spices and foods being sold in the area filled the gentle breeze which blew through the market area. Many people were trying to close business deals all at once and all at the top of their lungs.**

**I was seated at a sidewalk café table with two other men who were engrossed in a heated discussion. But just as quickly as my surroundings became known to me, a single voice seemed to consume all the sounds, so the activity continued but all I could hear was this one deep-throated voice.”**

***“I will sweep away everything in all the land. I will sweep away both people and animals alike. Even the birds of the air and the fish of the sea will die. I will reduce them to heaps of rubble, along with the rest of humanity.” 1***

**“Who are you?” I spoke up, but the voice continued as if he had not heard me.**

***“I’ll crush your towns and cities with my fist and destroy every last trace of you. I’ll put an end to all the idolatrous priests, so that even the memory of them will disappear. For they go up to their roofs and bow to the sun, moon, and stars. They claim to follow me, but then they worship others, too.***

***So now I will destroy them! And I’ll destroy those who used to worship me, but now no longer do. They no longer ask for my guidance or seek my blessings.”1***

**“Stop, tell me who you are!” Jeff stood up raising his voice in nervous excitement. “Are you the King of this land?”**

***“Stand in silence of my presence, for the awesome day of my judgment has come. I have prepared my people for a great slaughter and have chosen their executioners. On that Day of Judgment, I’ll punish the leaders of the land and all those following pagan customs. Yes, I’ll punish those who participate in pagan worship ceremonies, and those who steal and kill to fill their masters’ homes with loot.***

***On that day a cry of alarm will come from the Fish Gate and echo throughout the newer sections of the city. And a great crashing sound will come from the surrounding hills. Wail in sorrow, all you who live in the market area, for all who buy and sell there will die.” 1***

**“What, this marketplace?” Jeff reluctantly spoke up again as he slowly took his seat. “Are you talking about here?”**

***“I’ll search with lanterns in the city’s darkest corners to find and punish those who sit contended in their ways, indifferent to me, thinking I’ll do nothing at all to them. They’re the very ones whose property will be plundered by the enemy* *whose homes will be ransacked. They will never have a chance to live in the new homes they have built. They’ll never drink wine from the vineyards they’ve planted.***

***That terrible day is near. Swiftly it comes – a day when strong men will cry bitterly. It is a day when my anger will be poured out. It is a day of terrible distress and anguish, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, of clouds, blackness, trumpet calls, and battle cries. Down go the walled cities and strongest battlements!***

***Because you’ve sinned against me, I’ll make you as helpless as a blind man searching for a path. Your blood will be poured out into the dust, and your bodies will lie there rotting on the ground.” 1***

**“Why are you saying all of this?” Jeff yelled, “Do you want something from me?”**

***“Your silver and gold will be of no use to you on that day of my anger. For the whole land will be devoured by the fire of my jealousy. I’ll make a terrifying end of all the people on earth.***

***Gather together you shameless nation. Gather while there is still time, before judgment begins and your opportunity is blown away like chaff. Act now, before the fierce fury falls and the terrible day of my anger begins.***

***Beg me to save you – all you who are humble, all you who uphold justice. Walk humbly and do what is right. Perhaps even yet I’ll protect you from my anger on that day of destruction.” 1***

**Jeff’s revelation continued: “I turned to the men at my table and asked them if this was why they had gathered at the market square. But they couldn’t hear me and simply continued their conversation.”**

***“All the cities will be rooted out and left in desolation. And how terrible it’ll be for you who live along the coast and inland, for this judgment is against you, too. I’ll destroy you until not one of you is left. The coastal area will become a pasture, a place of shepherd camps and enclosures for sheep.***

***The few survivors of this area will pasture there. They’ll lie down to rest in the abandoned houses of those no longer there. I’ll visit my people in kindness and restore their prosperity again.***

***However, I’ve heard the taunts of the people who are my enemies, mocking those who love me and invading their borders. Now, as surely as I live, they’ll be destroyed as completely as Sodom and Gomorrah. Their land will become a place of weeds, salt pits, and eternal desolation. Those of my people who are left will plunder them and take their land.***

***They’ll receive the wages of their pride, for they have scoffed at my people. I’ll terrify them as I destroy all the gods in the land. Then people from nations around the world will worship me, each in their own land.” 1***

**“You… You,” I cried! “Who are you? Where are you?”**

***“I… have… spoken!”***

**“Papa, with the conclusion of those last three words the voice faded away, the street sounds returned, and I turned to the men sitting at my table. They… were but a pile of bones!”**

**In shock I shouted, “Who are you?”**

**“The white light returned in the dense fog consuming everything in my sight and then I woke up.”**

**Jeff concluded his account of the dream as he turned his head towards Papa for the first time.**

**“You’re right, Jeff.” Papa uttered after a few silent moments. “I have never encountered someone with a dream like that before. I don’t know what to make of it, but it sounds like God was talking to you.”**

**“God? Oh Papa,” Jeff sounded off with a voice of indignation.**

**“Jeff, it sounds like God is calling to you.” Papa proclaimed as he quickly tried to remember parts of the dream. “He was giving hope to all who were humble, after he boldly addressed those who were prideful.”**

**“Oh, Papa,” Jeff reiterated with emphasis. “I don’t believe in God. Why would He talk to me?”**

**“Jeff you’re hurting; I don’t understand any of this, really.” Papa continued, “But what else can you make of such a dream?”**

**“You’re a crazy old man Papa!” Jeff spewed out as he quickly got up from his seat and left Papa’s house.**

**1 Zephaniah 1 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER FIVE**

# **Friendship**

**“Jason, I must admit I was scared after that first dream,” Jeff confessed looking at his son. “Even though the dream was several months old when I first shared it with Papa, it still freaked me out. I didn’t know what to think.”**

**Jason just sat there with his eyes and mouth seemingly frozen in an open awestruck position. He was speechless; what could he say after such a revelation? Then Jason’s eyes were distracted over to the water’s edge.**

**“Pop,” Jason said in a flat tone and then swallowed his saliva. “You left your fishing pole in the water and there’s another pull on your line.”**

**“Thanks son you’re right,” Jeff calmly replied as he retrieved the rod just as it was about to be submerged into the water and removed the hook from his catch. He placed the fish on a tethered line and threw it back into shallow water. “Whoa, this is the biggest trout I’ve caught yet. We’ll have it for breakfast.”**

**Jason simply sat there and visually followed his dad’s movements. Jeff then gathered his thoughts and proceeded on with his story.**

**“Now…let me see, Jason. Three weeks had then passed since I walked out of Papa’s house. The old fool, I felt like I should have never talked to him in the first place. What does Papa know anyway?**

**God, if there is a God, why would he want to talk to me? Jason, when I was a teenager my predominant thoughts could easily be summed up in two short thoughts.”**

**“Oh, and what would they be?” Jason questioned.**

**Jeff soberly replied, “I’m nothing, I’m nobody!”**

**“Oh…,” Jason replied in like.**

**Jeff then tried to clarify, “You see Son, my thoughts were consumed over the many things in life which I could see and touch at this young age; so, I wasn’t in any state of mind to conceive of help coming from anywhere else, especially from something I couldn’t see.”**

**“I’ve got friends,” Jeff rationalized. “I’ll get through this by myself.”**

**Then Jeff deviated from the story for a moment to take a quick assessment. “Jason, have you ever had any thoughts like those?”**

**“Occasionally,” Jason confessed with his eyes focused on the dirt beneath his feet.**

**“Son it’s okay to have feelings like that but try to remember your mom and I will be here to help whenever you need it,” Jeff assured Jason with confidence. “We don’t have all the answers, but we’ll do whatever we are able to.”**

**“Well Jason, I better get back to my story; your Mom, Sam, and Juan were all planning to come over to visit with me in a few hours to hang out,” Jeff recalled. “So, I felt I had a little time to knap; I still wasn’t sleeping well and knew my friends would wake me up when they got to my apartment.”**

**Jeff had grown up in the same neighborhood with these three friends. With all the dysfunction in Jeff’s family, he found his only comfort through this small network of friends. Jeff felt somewhat grounded and secure knowing he had someone to turn to. This stability was just enough for Jeff through his elementary school years and into part of his secondary education.**

**It wasn’t as close as a tight knit family could have provided him, but Jeff was very shy. When a person is shy, it is actually easier to open up in a larger group setting than on a one-on-one basis, even though both situations are challenging.**

**Opening up to individuals was very difficult for Jeff, so even having three good friends was quite an accomplishment for him.**

**Margaret was the smartest of the three friends and quite pragmatic in her approach to most of life’s challenges. Sam and Juan, on the other hand, were anything but pragmatic. They jumped into any situation without giving things a full consideration.**

**Jeff had a brief thought about confiding in Margaret at one point in time, but a brief thought was as far as it went. Singling her out to share his dreams would only complicate his life. He wasn’t ready or willing to go there, yet.**

**Jeff sat down on his sofa and well, he was more tired than he thought. In a minute or two Jeff was fast asleep and entering into another dream. It began with the now familiar white flash of light, and Jeff noticed there were three silhouettes slowly emerging from the fog-like atmosphere.**

**“Jeff? Jeff, is that you?” Sam yelled out about forty feet away in the thinning mist. “We thought you would be in your apartment, but we couldn’t find you.”**

**“Sam, Juan, Margaret?” Jeff questioned in complete surprise. “What are you all doing here? And, where are we?”**

**“We thought you would be able to tell us!” Juan responded. “What is this place?”**

**Jeff ignored Juan’s question as he turned to Margaret, “You look good with your hair tied back with that scarf and your long blue dress.” Jeff had never seen Margaret in a dress before.**

**“Thanks,” Margaret blushed a little as she responded, “You’re looking quite robust in those…clothes.”**

**Sam and Juan overshadowed the moment with a few loud snickers.**

**“Sam,” Juan laughed, looking at Sam’s legs. “You’re wearing a dress!”**

**“Quiet you guys! There is someone else coming,” Jeff interrupted. “And Juan, you might look down and see what you are wearing, as well my friend.” Juan looked down at himself and simply grimaced.**

**At that very moment a man with two servants and a heifer rounded a bend in the road. An arid landscape had completely replaced the bright light and subsequent mist.**

**“Hello, can you tell us where we are?” Jeff could think of nothing else to say.**

**“You are on the road just outside of Bethlehem,” reported the old gentleman. “I am Samuel from the Court of King Saul.”**

**“You mean Bethlehem, Pennsylvania?” Juan blurted out.**

**“I don’t know of any Pennsyl…what you said. We are in Judea,” declared Samuel with a smile. “You are welcome to walk with me if you wish. I am looking for a man named Jesse and you may be of some help to me.”**

**So, Samuel, Juan and all the rest of the kids continued down the road to Bethlehem, together. When they arrived the elders of the town saw them and trembled.**

***They asked, “Do you come in peace?”***

***Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice this heifer. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” 2***

**For no good reason Jeff suddenly shouted out: “And where is the man called Jesse?”**

**From the rear of the gathering a voice was heard “It is I,” and Jesse made his way to stand before Samuel.**

**Samuel began by instructing Jesse, and all those who wished to join him, to consecrate themselves and then to return to him at once. So, all the men went home to bathe and change their clothes.**

**“What is Samuel doing?” whispered Margaret.**

**“I don’t know, but everyone seems to be content so far,” replied Jeff. “Somehow they seem to know what Samuel is up to.”**

**Upon the men’s return Samuel instructed them to follow him. When they arrived at the sacrificial sight, Samuel saw Eliab, one of Jesse’s many sons, and thought, *Surely the anointed one stands here before us.***

***But a still small voice said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. I do not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart.”***

***Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, “He has not chosen this one either.”***

***Jesse then had Shammah pass by. But Samuel said: “Nor has He chosen this one.”* Jesse was getting a little upset and called more of his sons forward in the gathering crowd.**

***Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “None of these will do.”***

***So, he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”***

***“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.”***

***Samuel said, “Send for him; we will not continue until he arrives.”***

***So, Jesse sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.***

***Then Samuel heard from within him the small voice proclaiming, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”***

***So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit came powerfully upon the one named David. 2***

**Samuel sacrificed the heifer and then a celebration followed which lasted for many hours. The guests enjoyed good food and wine. David played his lyre to the pleasure of all in attendance.**

**After the celebration had drawn to a close, Samuel then returned to the palace of King Saul and left Jeff, Margaret, Sam, and Juan behind with David’s family.**

**“Well that was certainly different.” Sam said as he turned towards Jeff.**

**“Yeah, this isn’t anything like our culture back in Pittsburgh,” Jeff responded to Sam as he scratched his head. “This might take a little time to get used to.”**

**David turned away from his family members and approached the new visitors, “So where are your travels taking you four?”**

**“Oh, we don’t have any definite plans,” Margaret spoke up as she turned her head towards Jeff. “We just had an unexpected change in our schedule this morning.”**

**Jeff’s facial expression produced a slight grimace as he turned to look back at Sam and Juan.**

**“Well you are welcome to stay here for a while, if you like,” David offered.**

**“Thank you,” Margaret responded. “I think that would be very good; don’t you think so, guys?”**

**“Ah… yeah, that would be great!” Jeff replied with a sheepish grin.**

**So, Jeff and his friends actually ended up spending several weeks with David as he tended his flock of sheep. The kids helped him as best they could and kicked off a good friendship with David.**

**Meanwhile at the palace, the Spirit had departed from King Saul and an evil spirit began to torment him.**

***Saul’s attendants said to him, “Let us search for someone who can play the lyre. He will play when the evil spirit comes on you, and you will feel better.”***

***So, Saul said to his attendants, “Find someone who plays well and bring him to me.”***

***One of Saul’s servants spoke up, “I have seen David, a son of Jesse of Bethlehem, who knows how to play the lyre. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine-looking man. And the Lord is with him.”***

***Then Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, “Send me your son David, who is with the sheep.” 2***

**So, Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine and a young goat, and sent them with his son David to Saul. The kids had nothing better to do, so they decided to make the journey also.**

**David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor-bearers. Jeff and the other kids couldn’t have been happier staying with David. They learned much more about the prevailing culture around them and saw many wonderful sights in the palace.**

***Then Saul sent word to Jesse, saying, “Allow David to remain in my service, for I am pleased with him.”* And so, David remained in King Saul’s service for a time.**

***Whenever the evil spirit came on Saul, David would take up his lyre and play. Then relief would come to Saul; he would feel better. 2***

**There were lengthy periods of time, however, in which David’s services to the King weren’t needed. So, David asked for permission to go back home and check on his flock of sheep with the promise he would return to the King promptly when called. Saul agreed and David started packing for the short trip home.**

**Jeff found David just as he was about to leave. “Where are you going David?”**

**“I’m going to check on my sheep,” David replied in a matter-a-fact tone of voice.**

**“Why?” Margaret broke in as she and the other guys entered the area.**

**“They miss me and, I … well I miss them,” David looked at Margaret with a big smile.**

**“What?” Sam and Juan blurted out simultaneously.**

**“You miss sheep?” Juan questioned.**

**“Yes, they’re used to me caring for them and I want to make sure they’re okay. I’m their shepherd! I noticed you all have had a lot of fun here in the palace, but where do you work when you’re at home?” David proceeded to question in return.**

**“Work?” retorted Sam. “We don’t work at home.”**

**“You don’t work?” David felt a little confused. “Well what do you do?”**

**Jeff tried to explain; “David, it’s a little hard for me to clearly convey, but we play around similarly to what we have been doing here, but in a different way.”**

**“You must be very rich then,” David said as he flung his pack over his shoulder.**

**Jeff placed his hand on David’s other shoulder, “Why do you care for sheep?”**

**“Well, sheep are an important part of our family’s income,” David began as he placed his bag back on the floor. “Oh, the shepherding job is not looked upon as a job of any importance and usually goes to the youngest brother if not to a hired hand, if a family has enough money. In many regards it’s looked upon as a servant’s job, but I don’t see it that way.”**

**Juan broke in, “Servant? It sounds like your dad and mine would get along just fine David. My dad gives me the worst jobs he can find.”**

**David smiled and continued on, “Sheep look to their shepherd for everything, including the preservation of their own life. Without a shepherd, sheep would stray away into danger or death by a lion, wolf, or bear.**

**They wouldn’t know where to find the best food or water. And you know, when a sheep falls over it can’t even get up without a little extra help. Sheep, by nature, need a parent figure or leader to feel safe and comforted.**

**In return our family gets wool for our clothes, food for our table, and additional income from sales during the year. I don’t know if any of my brothers would even bother to go look for one or two lost sheep, the sheep would simply wander away.”**

**“You sound like you really do care for them,” Jeff concluded.**

**“I do,” David said as he once again reached down for his pack.**

**“Guys” Jeff said as he turned to the others, “let’s all go back with David and give him a hand with the sheep!”**

**“Are you nuts?” Sam and Juan replied. Then Sam added, “We have it great here. Why should we leave?”**

**“Okay, you two stay. Margaret, are you interested in coming?” Jeff inquired.**

**“Sure, I’ll go with you. Someone will need to look after the both of you!” Margaret smiled. “Let’s go!”**

**2 1Samuel 16 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER SIX**

# **Courage and Strength**

**So, the three friends David, Jeff, and Margaret took the road back to Bethlehem. The kids found they had a good deal more in common as they swapped stories, played little jokes on each other, and shared in all the work.**

**This work ran the gamut from guard duty for the sheep to food preparation.**

**With the arrival of all the spring lambs, the flock had grown. Each day, they needed to move the flock in order to find a grassy area with new growth. The youngest lambs had a hard time keeping up. This meant during a number of relocations the kids found themselves walking with a young lamb straddled across their shoulders.**

**Keeping the flock together kept everyone on their toes. Jeff and Margaret found out taking care of and protecting the sheep was more involved than they had first thought. Each night they would build a new campfire and share with one another about the events of the day.**

**David was amused at the things Jeff and Margaret brought up in their conversations. Because this was David’s normal reality, he was intrigued by the kids’ naive approach to each day in the hill country. They all laughed at themselves in the end as good friends often do. This was the best time of the day for Margaret.**

**Time was well spent in the hill country of David’s family, binding the kids’ friendships gave them comfort and peace. Jeff and Margaret gave very little thought to their own personal safety out in the wilderness as long as David was around. They were content and times were indeed good.**

**Even though everything was going well for them, it wasn’t so for many others. *In a not so distant land, the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. Then the Philistines pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah.***

***Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped near the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them. 3***

**Much to their dismay, Sam and Juan were drafted into the army. They looked totally out of place with axes and spears; much like farmers asked to design a palace for the King.**

**“I told you, we should have gone back to Bethlehem with the others,” Juan confessed nervously.**

**“Oh, you didn’t say anything of the sort!” Sam shot back.**

**Juan turned away and withdrew into his own anxious thoughts.**

**“What am I supposed to do with this?” Juan whispered under his breath as he examined the height of his wooden spear.**

**The spear was made of sturdy wood stock with a sharp finely carved point. But then Juan thought about the enemy across the valley, they had weapons of metal. Real swords and spears not easily broken, and shields to match; it looked like the soldiers were even wearing breast plates of bronze.**

**“What good is this piece of wood going to do for me in a battle?” Juan shook his head in discouragement and turned his face down towards the ground.**

**Sam was dealing with his own issues as he gazed upon the enemy across the valley. Both he and Juan were among those ordered onto fourth watch, during the early morning hours.**

**“Juan, look!” Sam blurted out as he pointed across the valley.**

**Without any advance notice they began to see some brisk movement in the enemy camp. Sam’s announcement also brought over a number of Saul’s hardened soldiers. Six gathered around Sam and Juan while two other soldiers left to alert the others.**

***A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver’s rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.***

***Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.” 3***

**Sam and Juan just looked at each other. You could read the expressions on their faces: This is not looking good brother.**

***Then the Philistine said, “This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other.”***

***On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified. 3***

**Now three of David’s oldest brothers had also followed Saul to the war. They were Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah. These three weren’t trained warriors, but unlike Sam and Juan, they were ready to take on the Philistine army.**

**However, Goliath was a formidable foe and the three brothers, like the rest of Saul’s army, weren’t stepping forward to accept Goliath’s challenge.**

***For forty days the Philistine, Goliath, came forward every morning and evening and took his stand.” 3***

**Meanwhile, back in Bethlehem, the three friends were innocently passing their time in peace and comradery.**

**Then late in the *day Jesse went out to the hillside to find David and said to him, “Take this roasted grain and these ten loaves of bread for your brothers and hurry to their camp. Also take along these ten cheeses to the commander of their unit.***

***See how your brothers are and bring back some assurance from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel at the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines.” 3***

**“What, my brothers also went to war?” David interrupted. “Why didn’t you tell me?”**

**“We will talk of this later,” Jesse rebutted.**

**So very early the next morning David loaded up and set out with Jeff and Margaret, as his father had directed him. They reached the camp as the army was heading out to its battle positions, shouting the war cry. Israel and the Philistines were drawing up their lines facing each other.**

**David left his things with the keeper of supplies and ran to the battle lines to locate his brothers, so he might inquire how they were. As he was talking with them, Goliath, the Philistine champion from Gath, stepped out from his lines and shouted his usual defiance, and David heard it.**

***Whenever the Israelite’s saw the man, they all fled from him in great fear. 3* Today would be no different from the last forty days.**

**David observed their behavior and started listening to those around him. *The soldiers talked among themselves saying, “Do you see how this man keeps coming out? He comes out to defy Israel. The king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. He will also give him his daughter in marriage and will exempt his family from taxes in Israel.”***

***After hearing the men standing near him David replied, “Why do you talk about wealth? This Goliath brings disgrace upon Israel! Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?”***

***When Eliab, David’s oldest brother, heard him speaking with the men, he burned with anger at him and asked, “Why have you come down here? And with whom did you leave those sheep in the wilderness?***

***I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle.”***

***“Now what have I done?” said David. “‘Can’t I even speak?” 3***

**David then turned away from his brother, Eliab, to a few nearby soldiers and brought up the same issues regarding these Philistines; but again these men answered him with the same concerns and fears as the others had expressed.**

**David’s conversations were overheard and reported to King Saul; so Saul sent for him.**

***David said to Saul, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.”***

***Saul replied, “You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth.”***

***But David said to Saul, “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.***

***Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”***

***No one had confronted Saul with such courage and determination, so Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you.”***

***Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he wasn’t used to them.***

***“I cannot go in these,” he said to Saul, “because I’m not used to them.”***

***So, he took them off. Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag and with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine. 3***

**Jeff and Margaret couldn’t believe their eyes and ears. They looked at each other in dismay. Was David nuts or what? How could he be facing this giant?**

***The Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, began coming closer to David. He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him.***

***He said to David, “Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?” And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. “Come here,” he said, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!”***

***David said to the Philistine, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head.***

***This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”***

***The Philistine moved closer to attack him and David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and Goliath fell to the ground. 3***

**All of the Israelites gave a thunderous cheer and the kids just stood there with their jaws hanging open in disbelief.**

***So, David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.***

***David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine’s sword and drew it from the sheath. He cut off Goliath’s head with the sword.***

***When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran. Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. Their dead were strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron. When the Israelites returned from chasing the Philistines, they plundered their camp.***

***David took the Philistine’s head and brought it to Jerusalem; he put the Philistine’s weapons in his own tent. 3***

**Margaret ran into his tent, right up to David and hugged him. “I can’t believe you are safe!” She had tears flowing down her face and placed a kiss on his cheek. “You are so brave!”**

**David blushed. “The Lord was with me and it is because of Him, Goliath is dead.”**

**Margaret’s expression of concern took David by surprise.**

**Jeff took hold of Margaret’s arm and directed her out of David’s tent. “It’s time we go.”**

**“What do you mean?” snapped Margaret. “It’s time?”**

**“Jeff it’s time to wake up sleepy head,” Juan began shaking Jeff’s shoulders. “Come on, we’re all going out for pizza! Jeff? Jeff!”**

**Jeff woke up as the light once again faded to reveal his small apartment and his friends’ mundane expressions.**

**“Jeff, you look awful. Are you okay?” Sam asked with concern. “You’re all sweaty.”**

**“Yeah, my friend…I’m okay.” Jeff soberly replied.**

**With a large sigh Jeff pulled himself together to assure them he was fine. He put on his shoes and the four of them turned to leave.**

**With one last turn of his head, Jeff looked back towards the sofa as he pulled the door shut. He furrowed his eyebrows closely together and deposited yet one more unbelievable dream into his memory bank.**

**3 1Samuel 17 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER SEVEN**

# **A Flood of Deceptions**

**“Pop, those are wonderful stories.” Jason enthusiastically spoke up to encourage his dad, “Why didn’t you tell Mom and the others about them?”**

**“I couldn’t Jason; you don’t understand.” Jeff nervously responded in a rattled tone, “I had tried very hard to make some kind of sense from the whole adventure with Samuel and David, but its’ meaning simply alluded me. Sharing these dreams back then would have branded me as a fool. Would you share anything totally off the wall with Vince, especially if the telling would send him the message you really hadn’t trusted him enough to share before?”**

**Jason sighed, “I see your point Pop. That would have been tough.”**

**“Jason, even small deceptions have an ugly way of growing out of control. Just look at me! It’s taken me this long to begin sharing with you and still I don’t know what to say next.” Jeff concluded his thought and began tinkering with his fishing gear.**

**In this new awkward silence Jason turned his head away. He was at a loss for words and began pondering how I might be spending my Saturday. It had to be better than what he was in the middle of at their camp site.**

**Jason realized his dad’s stories were intriguing but they were also surrounded by confusion and sadness. What was his dad going to reveal next? Jason wasn’t so sure he even wanted to hear it. The sun was setting now, and Jason watched as a few stars began to emerge.**

**Jeff had Jason in his peripheral vision, but his thoughts were clearly focused on his last dream. He revisited some of the emotions he initially had about David. David did have a friendly likeable character and was easy to get along with, yet he also had a brave unpredictable side which was hard to understand.**

**Just like David though, when he was in the Palace or at home in Bethlehem, Jeff too had friends in which one could clearly divide into two groups. The first group was comprised of his close friends, those whom he spent much time with, like Margaret, Sam, and Juan.**

**And then there was a second group which he saw only as needed. Other than Jeff the two groups never intersected. This was his chosen daily reality. It isn’t an uncommon situation in an urban society and Jeff felt it worked for him.**

**For that matter, he actually spent a good deal of his time by himself watching the news, game shows, and playing a variety of video games to occupy what extra time he had. Jeff liked watching the news and was drawn to the seemingly wild, chaotic, and turbulent stories being reported.**

**The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing as Martin Luther King Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The Country had lost a president with the JFK assassination and on a lighter side in the news the Beatles rock-group was quickly taking a new hold on the USA in 1963.**

**Many of these news stories were expressing the turmoil we were facing in our country and Jeff had no problem in seeing the same emotions of discontent and anger in a number of young people in the Pittsburgh area.**

**Jeff related local events to the national events with the thought of Why? Why is this happening? Why can’t things be better? Why do people need to change?**

**“Pop?” Jason uttered and broke his dad’s train of thought.**

**“Oh Jason, I’m so sorry! My mind wandered away for a while.” Jeff said apologetically.**

**Jeff’s thoughts concerning current events had all been stirred up from the turbulent events in the last dream he had shared with Jason.**

**It must have seemed a little sur-real for Jeff to realize he had been gazing unknowingly into the darkening night sky, right in front of his son.**

**Jeff reached for some wood to feed their dwindling fire with the hope he could transition past this awkward moment.**

**“It’s getting late,” Jeff said as he recovered his composure. “The fish we had for dinner are already a somewhat distant memory for me. You know what Jason, let’s pull out all the fixings for our S’mores and have a time-honored dessert. Okay?”**

**“Yeah, I was hoping we brought dessert,” Jason agreed and smiled now that his dad’s silence had come to an end.**

**Without any additional needed prompting, Jeff grabbed hold of a large branch and started spreading the fire out. This action was needed to bring the heat down and prepare the pit to roast their marsh-mellows.**

**Jeff continued to prep the fire, “Jason, after we’re done with our dessert, we can clean up all of our cooking gear and maybe we should call your Mom to let her know we’ll be camping here for the night.”**

**“Okay, but I want to hear more of your story Pop.” Jason eagerly pursued, “your story is great, but I have a feeling there is something more you haven’t shared yet.”**

**“Well, I don’t know about great son,” Jeff replied as he kept stirring the campfire. “But yes, I have more to share with you and a good night’s rest just may be what I need to get myself prepared and organized.”**

**Both Jason and his dad settled in as they repeatedly heated their marsh-mellows and pressed them neatly with a piece of chocolate between two crisp layers of cracker.**

**“Boy, these are great Pop!” Jason was now smiling from ear to ear.**

**Jeff returned a smile of total agreement and felt so happy his son was enjoying this time of father/son bonding.**

**So after their wonderful chocolate dessert, Jason surprised his dad by offering his services for KP duty and began cleaning up. Jeff pulled out his flip-phone and gave Maggie a call to catch her up on the day’s activities, and to let her know they would be back sometime the next day.**

**Their younger preschoolers, Alice and Charlotte, were just getting ready for bed. They were thrilled to pass along a good-night kiss to Pop over the phone.**

**Maggie questioned, “Jeff, how are you and Jason doing?”**

**“Oh, we’re doing okay I guess,” Jeff reported as he turned away from the camp site and stepped away from Jason. “Jason has been very responsive and is eager to hear my story.”**

**Jeff then changed his tone of voice, “Maggie, I seem to be struggling to find the right words though. What is Jason going to think about me when I tell him what I’ve done?”**

**“Honey, I don’t think you’re giving him enough credit,” Maggie said to urge Jeff on. “Just tell him the truth; he’ll be okay. You’ll see.”**

**“Okay, Maggie. I’ll do my best; goodnight, love you, see you all tomorrow.” Jeff said smiling to end the phone call.**

**“Love you too, goodnight.” Maggie returned in a loving voice and disconnected the call.**

**Jeff returned to the camp site just as Jason had finished his work. The smoldering-campfire was still in prime condition for roasting marshmallows, but both of them looked at each other with a smile and began throwing more fuel onto the fire. They weren’t ready to put an end to this evening, just yet.**

**Jason and his dad were generally feeling more it peace, and relaxed sitting around their roaring campfire now, then when Jeff struck the first spark prior to dinner.**

**It was such a beautiful summer evening Jeff thought it would be great to forego the tent and sleep beneath the stars. There wouldn’t be too many evenings like this one left this season.**

**Jason agreed and they both weren’t really in any hurry to douse out the fire and locate their sleeping bags. Father and son began sharing little humorous stories which were totally unrelated to the story Jeff was there to share. The laughter and joking around were long overdue in their relationship.**

**Sleep, however, was inevitable after one more hour beside a hot campfire.**

**“Pop that was a lot of fun,” Jason joyfully expressed.**

**Jeff pounced right back with a contented smile, “I think so too, Son. I don’t know why we haven’t done this more often. Next time we’ll bring your Mom and the girls, okay? There is still some great fall weather ahead for us before winter sets in.”**

**“Okay,” Jason concluded. “That’s a great idea.”**

**Jeff had Jason drown the fire with a bucket of lake water and both found their sleeping bags guided now by the light of the newly risen summer moon.**

**Jason was sleeping soundly in no time and felt good about being with his dad. Jeff wasn’t quite that relaxed, however.**

**He put both of his hands up under his head as a prop and looked up at the night sky for quite a while. Jeff was contemplating how he should continue his story the next morning.**

**How was he to clearly express himself? Which dreams if any more should he even share? When would he confess his full involvement with law enforcement?**

**Jeff’s thought process was spinning wildly, but fatigue won out. He turned on to his side and closed his eyes in slumber.**

**It had been about sixteen years since Jeff had one of his so-called different dreams. He was much comforted by this fact; Jeff felt his faith was continuing to grow stronger year after year. Jeff’s peaceful state of sleep helped him to feel like he was a normal person and his life was on track.**

**But tonight, that comfort was going to be shattered. The dazzling light appeared soon after he fell asleep. It was even brighter than Jeff remembered and there were the sounds of many loud and chaotic voices. Soon the light relented to reveal a brawling street fight between three men and a lone woman.**

**“Hey, get away from her!” Jeff screamed as he lunged toward the attackers. To his surprise, they did run away.**

**“Are you okay?” Jeff asked with concern, holding his hand out to help lift the veiled woman up from the dirt street.**

**“I think so?” The woman anxiously responded. “Those men were…”**

**“Margaret? Maggie, what are you doing here?” Jeff was amazed seeing her there but then quickly realized her attackers had already regrouped. “We have to get out of here, come on.”**

**“Oh no,” Maggie grunted as she grabbed ahold of Jeff’s hand.**

**They ran as quickly as they could through a very crowded street no wider than an alley. The men’s voices were drawing closer, but Jeff didn’t want to waste even one second of time to turn and look. He and Maggie couldn’t help bumping into people in their attempt to escape, as though the locals were intentionally trying to slow them down.**

**“Run… Run!” Jeff repeated while in his head he had no idea as to where they were going.**

**Suddenly Jeff felt a firm hand grasp the back of his tunic, and both he and Maggie were pulled off the alley into a dark smelly room.**

**“What are you doing?” shouted Maggie.**

**A low but demonstrative voice commanded both of them to be quiet.**

**“Shh… they are almost past. They did not see,” the voice whispered purposefully.**

**And indeed, the noise and chaos in the street settled down. In their newly found peace, Maggie and Jeff sensed their hearts pounding out of control.**

**Jeff blurted out, “Who are you?”**

**“Shh… I want to make sure they are not listening outside. It is not safe for any stranger to be on these streets. These are evil times!”**

**“Who are you?” whispered Maggie with intensity.**

**“My name is Japheth. I and my family live near this village. We will spend the next few hours in silence and then I will sneak you both out of here to my family home.”**

**And so, it was the next few hours passed silently. The three sat there in the dark and listened as the footsteps outside became fewer and fewer until the street seemed to be deserted.**

**After a little more time passed, Japheth poked his head out of the doorway, briefly scanned in each direction and then turned back to his perplexed companions to announce: “It is time, we go.”**

**In complete silence the three anxiously made their way out of the village. Japheth led the way as Jeff and Maggie scrambled to keep up with him.**

**The village was only about the size of eight or ten elongated blocks in Jeff’s home neighborhood, but totally different. Besides the dirt streets in the village, many of the structures had small store fronts on the lower floor and then family housing on the second floor. Most of the dwellings also had little balconies on the upper floor on which rugs or clothing were hanging over the railings’ edge.**

**Japheth seemed to know the layout of the village very well. It each corner or clearing he quickly scouted around to insure no one was in sight. Soon they had passed the last dwelling and disappeared into the countryside.**

**The air was hot and dry even at this late-night hour.**

**“Can we slow down now?” Maggie questioned. “I’m so hot. When’s the last time its’ rained here? Everything is so dry.”**

**“It does not rain here.” Japheth clarified, “Oh, we sometimes see clouds, but no rain. And no… we must move on.”**

**As the moon rose Jeff and Maggie got their first good glimpse at their rescuer. He was a dark-skinned man with shoulder length hair and an un-kept scraggly beard. He wore a tunic down past his knees and leather sandals on his hairy feet.**

**Maggie looked at him with a questionable eye, wondering if he should even be trusted. But since Japheth seemed to be their only hope, what other choice was there?**

**It took quite a while to reach Japheth’s house. The way was full of rocks and holes. It didn’t seem to be much of a road at all. Jeff received two cuts on his feet as he attempted to avoid all the obstacles in his way.**

**But reach the house they did, and Japheth directed the two travelers to a far corner of the room.**

**“You may rest here for the night. You are safe for now,” he assured them, and Jeff followed the sound of Japheth’s footsteps move to the other side of the room. All was now quiet, and all fell asleep.**

**Jeff and Maggie awoke to the early morning rush of a small family preparing for a day’s work. There was the sweet aroma of warm flat bread spread with some sort of a pasty meal on top.**

**“Please eat. I am Japheth’s wife, and these are our children. Japheth will be back soon,” the woman stated as she offered them some bread and quickly turned her attention to the needs of the children.**

**The food was very much appreciated. As they ate, Jeff and Maggie relaxed their minds even further and they began to take in the room around them.**

**Actually, it was the entire home; one large room with a dirt floor, partially covered by an assortment of colorful rugs, and a center pole supporting the roof of thatch. The walls were constructed of clay and straw bricks with animal skin coverings over the windows and door.**

**Maggie and Jeff were at peace, but they realized they were also very much lost.**

**“Japheth!” Jeff exclaimed as their host entered the room.**

**“Listen, my friends,” Japheth broke in. “There really is nowhere safe for you to journey now. I have consulted with my brothers, Shem and Ham, and against their advice I have convinced them to let you stay here and help me with my work.”**

**“Thank you,” Jeff replied. “What is your work?”**

**“My family has built a boat and while my brothers are completing it, it is my job to stock all the provisions onboard before it is time to leave.” Japheth stated plainly.**

**“We can do that.” Maggie said with assurance. “I am so thankful for your help last night. Why are the people in the village so angry?”**

**“They are always angry these days. The people are corrupt, evil, steal, and even murder for the smallest gain,” Japheth explained. “We must not talk of this anymore. There is much work left to do and so little time.”**

**So, all three left for the storehouse area and packed two carts full of supplies, hitched up a donkey to each cart and headed off down a path. In about an hour they passed through a little valley into a large clearing.**

**“Oh! This is the boat?” Maggie asked in disbelief. “This is huge! Why’s it so big?”**

**“It is necessary.” Japheth simply stated as Jeff looked on. “Come, let’s put these supplies inside. We must go back for more. The day’s work has only begun.”**

**Just as Japheth had explained earlier, Jeff looked up and saw Shem and Ham busily working away on some of the final details on the boat. The brothers called out a friendly greeting to the new workers but remained focused on the job at hand.**

**So, with little else to say the three awkwardly matched companions unloaded their carts and stowed the supplies deep into the interior of the boat. Then back to the storehouse for what turned out to be trip after trip of seemingly endless cargo.**

**Two days now had passed by in which both Jeff and Maggie were then getting to know Japheth’s family on a first name basis. During some periods of rest, Jeff had fun playing catch with the children while Maggie was giving Japheth’s wife, Maun, some needed help with her chores.**

**The children were happy in the games they played but were closely watched and instructed to stay near to the house.**

**On the third day, however, the mood of the family changed. Maggie noticed as soon as she woke up that something was different. Everyone was on edge and in a hurry to gather up their personal belongings.**

**Jeff called out to Japheth, “What’s happening?”**

**“It is time to go.” Japheth replied without even looking at Jeff.**

**Maggie spoke up, “Go? Go where?”**

**Maun nervously responded, “On the boat.”**

**‘But the boat is on dry land,” Maggie raised her voice in concern.**

**Jeff questioned, “Japheth, why would you leave your home to go there?”**

**Japheth repeated his first statement with emphasis, “It is time to go! Jeff…Maggie… the carts have been filled one last time. Will you take them on to the boat?”**

**“Okay, we will follow your family.” Jeff replied out of gratitude for Japheth’s continuing kindness.**

**Everyone quickly finished collecting what they could carry with Japheth’s continued prompting and soberly everyone walked out through the door. Maun made sure the animal-skin door was properly closed behind them, as was her custom to do.**

**The walk to the boat was generally quiet except for the added sounds of Japheth’s extended family. Everyone, especially the children, appeared to be a little on edge.**

**Jeff and Maggie were puzzled as to why they were all seeking refuge on a land-locked boat, although it was more than large enough for all of them.**

**As they drew closer to the boat, clouds began to gather in the sky; and as soon as they passed through the valley and into the clearing, Jeff’s and Maggie’s jaws dropped open.**

**The clearing was full of animals. Not just farm animals, but every possible type you could imagine.**

**“What is your father’s name?” Maggie shouted to Japheth above the noise of the animals and the mounting gusts of wind.**

**“Noah! Maggie, his name is Noah.” As Japheth made his reply it began to rain. “Come everyone, we must all get into the boat! Bring the children, Maun; the animals are almost all inside.”**

**Jeff and Maggie were continually feeding the remaining supplies off their carts to family members who loaded them into the boat.**

**It wasn’t long before the ground was saturated, and water began to pool.**

**“Jeff,” Japheth shouted above the chaos, “hand me those last supplies off your cart and we will be done.”**

**Just as Jeff handed Japheth the last of the supplies, there was heard many loud explosions. Besides the pounding rain, many fishers had suddenly opened up everywhere and water was gushing up from beneath the ground.**

**Jeff ran quickly to grab Maggie’s hand and realized the water was already up between their ankles and knees. As the explosions ended Jeff and Maggie tried wiping their eyes dry and as best they could, began to make their way back to Japheth and the door of the boat.**

**The water was still continuing to rise and was now at waist level. The undulating movement of the growing swells of water made it hard to keep their balance. Jeff and Maggie were taking one step forward followed by two steps backwards.**

**‘Japheth!” Jeff shouted out of panic, “Here, take Maggie’s hand! Can you reach her? “**

**Maggie looked up to Japheth with her arm stretched out to him, and even through the intense rain, she thought she saw tears flowing down his cheeks.**

**“I am sorry, my friends. I am so sorry; I am not allowed!” Japheth sobbed.**

**Japheth turned his back to them, and he sealed the door shut.**

**“No… No! Let us in!” both Jeff and Maggie shouted repeatedly.**

**They could barely keep their heads above the water level now.**

**“Japheth! Japheth help us!” their shouting continued.**

**Japheth stood inside the safety of the boat with his back leaning against the door and sobbing out of control.**

**Shem walked up to his brother and placed a hand on Japheth’s shoulder, “There is nothing more you could have done.”**

**Japheth simply nodded in agreement at Shem’s attempt to comfort him and the two brothers slowly walked to the interior of the boat to join their family. The boat had begun to shift from its’ resting place. Shem and Japheth’s eyes quickly connected as they realized the long-awaited journey for their family had begun.**

**The violent stormy conditions only continued outside and the turbulent water pulled Jeff and Maggie apart. Maggie screamed as she drifted off.**

**“Maggie!” Jeff shouted as his eyes franticly searched for her in the floating debris.**

**To complicate matters further, the thickening cloud cover dimmed the daylight and made it seem like dusk. It was getting harder for Jeff to see more than a few meters in front of him.**

**Splash! An unexpected wave hit Jeff directly in the face and he gasped for air. 4**

**“Maggie…” Jeff screamed.**

**“Pop… Pop, are you okay?” Jason shouted.**

**“Jason…? Oh, Jason it’s you, son.” Jeff exclaimed as he awoke, and his blood pressure passed its peak.**

**“Are you okay Dad? I was having a hard time waking you, so I doused you with a bucket of water from the lake.” Jason apologized.**

**“Oh Jason, I had another one of those dreams!” Jeff declared as he attempted to sit up. He dried his face using his shirt tail and combed his hair back with his fingers.**

**“We’re done! Let’s break up the camp site, pack and go home. I…I can’t tell you anymore.”**

**“Pop, what do you mean?” Jason replied.**

**“I’m sorry! Let’s go.” With that Jeff withdrew and wrapped him-self in contemplation of last night’s dream.**

**The ride home was just as quiet as the ride up to the lake had been. Jason was now more confused than ever and felt like his dad’s silence was his fault. He should have never hit him with the bucket of water.**

**As soon as the car pulled into the driveway and stopped, Jason retreated to his room. Jeff left everything in the car and anxiously scoped out each room until he located Maggie in the kitchen.**

**Maggie caught sight of Jeff out of the corner of her eye.**

**“Oh, we didn’t expect you two home so early.” Maggie exclaimed as she gave Jeff a welcome home kiss.**

**“Hi Daddy!” echoed the girls.**

**“Hi girls…Nor did I Maggie,” Jeff said quickly.**

**“It’s been many years since I have had any of my different dreams, but last night I had another one, a new one. Maggie, God told me there wouldn’t be any more dreams. I don’t know what to think!”**

**Maggie poured Jeff a cup of coffee and took his hand, “Sit down and tell me what happened. Girls, will you take your cereal bowls out to the patio? Your dad and I would like to talk for a while.”**

**The girls grabbed their bowls and juice boxes to head outside, as Maggie helped them with the sliding door.**

**The two adults sat down at the kitchen table and Jeff shared his dream.**

**“I don’t know what to say, Jeff.” Maggie replied after a pause. She had an odd look about her.**

**“I thought the dreams were behind me, Maggie. I felt as though I was moving forward, you know?” Jeff added in.**

**“Jeff, in my book you are, Honey. Don’t beat yourself up like that.” Maggie felt pushed into clearing the air, as it were, for the sake of her-own conscience; “I… have a confession to share with you too, Jeff.”**

**“Oh, really Maggie; are you going to tell me you have these dreams, too?” Jeff rationalized.**

**“Honey,” Maggie said calmly, “I haven’t had dreams…, but I did have the same flood dream you just shared with me.”**

**“What did you say?” Jeff’s eyes couldn’t have opened any wider.**

**“It was many years ago when you were having all your troubles and I thought I was going to lose you.” Tears began to flow down her cheeks.**

**“Maggie, you never told me!” Jeff said wrapping his arms around her.**

**“I didn’t think you would believe me,” Maggie sobbed, “and I was elated when you turned around and came back to me.”**

**“Oh Maggie, what’s happening to me?” Jeff hugged her tighter.**

**“Jeff, you’re not regressing in your life. You’re growing!” Maggie said with conviction.**

**“Growing, do you hear me? You are on the right course.”**

**“I don’t know, Maggie.” Jeff reluctantly responded.**

**Maggie pushed on, “I feel this is your best moment to talk with Jason.”**

**Then she grabbed Jeff’s turning chin and looked him straight in the eyes. “I think you had this dream now, because you’re afraid of losing Jason. But it would be wrong to stop trying. Do you hear me? Jason like everyone else, has to make his own choices, but he needs to hear your story… all of your story, Jeff. Don’t… stop… trying!” Maggie pleaded with everything she had in her.**

**“Oh Maggie…” Jeff responded.**

**“Jeff, do you love him enough to tell him?” Maggie ended with a sigh of resolution.**

**Jeff began to tear up, “You’re right, Honey. I don’t know how it will come out, but I’ll try.” Jeff’s mind had already begun recalling all he could remember Maggie had just shared with him. He was feeling uneasy about the fact Maggie had one of his dreams.**

**“Maggie…” Jeff curiously pushed the envelope, “have you ever had any dreams about… David?” Jeff shyly questioned.**

**“David? What’s his last name?” Maggie replied giving Jeff an odd look.**

**“Oh, it was nothing… never mind… it wasn’t anything really.” Jeff turned away from Maggie with a little smile, and a sigh of relief.**

**4 Genesis 6 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER EIGHT**

# **Crazy Old Man**

**Even though Jeff and Jason were home from their fishing excursion, Jeff’s mind was still spinning wildly. His shyness was certainly battling for control over his emotions. The heart felt conversation between he and his wife had just come to completion, but Jeff’s thoughts still found no peace. Jeff’s energy and enthusiasm levels hit a low point. He exhaled one large breath of air and the first thought to enter his mind was: Now what do I do?**

**Jeff stood up, walked away from his seat at the kitchen table, and placed his hand on the sliding-door handle. Transfixed at that spot he spent a few brief moments contemplating what Maggie had shared with him.**

**With a slow steady turn of his head Jeff glanced over his shoulder at Maggie, realizing she was right. Maggie had quickly refocused her attention on cleaning up after the girls who had so graciously helped her in preparing breakfast. She hummed a little tune as she worked.**

**Maggie had always been at Jeff’s side, available to back him up by pointing out God’s truth when he needed it. But she wasn’t able to physically change Jeff; he was still struggling with his emotions and simply had to put his trust completely on God. Jeff smiled as he looked at Maggie and then humbly contemplated his next move.**

**Jason really needed to know and understand all of the struggles his dad had been through if he was to maximize his potential and live a balanced adult life. But what was Jeff going to say to Jason? Now really! Oh, he had to stick to the truth of course, but this was going to be the most difficult conversation he has ever had.**

**Some of Jeff’s issues were strongly grounded in his childhood. Jeff was certainly struggling with his shyness; even with his son, he still had an underlying urge to withdraw from this whole conversation. He felt as though there might be rejection around any bend in the road. Rejection he felt might now come from his son.**

**He said a short prayer then managed to get a hold of his emotions at least for the short term. Jeff found hope in a new game plan and exhaled a load of stress quickly with another deliberate breath through his nostrils.**

**As if in a trance, Jeff slid open the door and walked out into the backyard; as his daughters streamed past him asking their mom for another juice box. Jeff started a new task by throwing kindling into their home fire-pit and slowly began building a fire with the strike of a match. It didn’t matter to him it was only mid-day.**

**This is when Jason noticed the activity from his upstairs window and went down to check it out; that’s also when he abruptly ended his phone call with me.**

**Jason didn’t know why his dad was acting so weird that morning but felt he should risk approaching him anyway.**

**“What’re you doing, Pop?” Jason began as he drew near to his dad.**

**“Jason, I’m sorry for how I acted out at the lake this morning. I was wrong! If it’s okay with you, I would like to pick up where we left off last night.”**

**“Oh,” Jason simply stated with some intrepidity.**

**Jeff was struck with the thought he needed to give Jason a better explanation; “Your Mom and I talked things over, and I realized it wouldn’t be right for me to close down now. Jason, I would be leaving you out and none of this, in any way, is your fault son.”**

**“Sure Pop.” Jason exhaled in relief and grinned, “I’d like that, let’s go on with your story.”**

**Jason broadened his smile as he joined in with his dad to build a stronger base for the emerging fire. Eventually both Jason and Jeff sat next to each other as the fire began to take off and sustain its-self.**

**“You know Jason, this has always been my problem. Running away that is.” Jeff began with a confession. “It’s comes more naturally to me than simply facing up to my fears. I guess not much has really changed in all these years.”**

**Jason broke in, “What do mean Pop?”**

**“Remember how I told you about Papa’s visits with me?” Jeff tried a little harder to explain, “Now I know why he was trying so hard to reach me, but I couldn’t see it at the time. One afternoon Jason, Papa came over to my apartment and sat himself down at my kitchen table.”**

**“How are you coming along with figuring out the secret of the leaf?” He began.**

**“Oh, I don’t know Papa.” I replied. I wasn’t really in the mood for Papa to bring up that topic.”**

**“You know Jeff, secrets can be tricky buggers!” Papa continued. “Some are easier to figure out than others. When a child is about three or four years old, a secret is anything new he has discovered. It lasts only as long as he can run to a parent, a sibling, or a playmate to tell them about what just happened.**

**The secret is then instantly revealed; it becomes the topic of conversation and the secret is no more. The conversation will continue until everyone in the family knows, and the proper laughs are heard, elements of surprise are expressed, or proper tears are rendered.”**

**“Is this going to be a long story, Papa?” Jeff flatly interjected.**

**Papa bounced back, “It depends.”**

**“Depends on what?” Jeff thrust back to Papa.**

**“Well, I guess it depends on how often you interrupt me,” Papa calmly replied with a revealing little smile and continued on with his story.**

**“The secret turned into an everyday learning and growing experience which helped to bond the family together. The child felt even more a part of things as a result of the experience and rarely got into trouble for sharing.**

**As the child grew a little older though, he decided not to share a secret. Perhaps because he thought it wouldn’t be well received. It really wasn’t too hard to keep this secret. He simply avoided one topic of discussion and communication seemed to still flow nicely; no one seemed to notice. Oh great, that works!”**

**“Papa, what are you trying to tell me?” Jeff broke in a little disgusted.**

**Papa kind of ignored Jeff’s remark and continued on with determination.**

**“However, Jeff, as the years continued to pass by, more secrets needed to be protected and more topics needed to be avoided. It was harder and harder to participate in family conversations. Now a young man, he realized it may be easier to seek out friends he sensed had similar secrets and talk with them.**

**He was right about his friends, but the secrets were never clearly received. They seemed to be rather the butt of many jokes, or of a more convoluted form of communication. But this relationship seemed to meet an immediate need.”**

**Jeff just sat there shaking his head and thinking - what a crazy old man.**

**Papa noticed Jeff but was still driven on. “They understand me more than my family does now; I can communicate freely with them. So, dialogue at home became rare.**

**The secrets, Jeff, worked as a power over this young man, projecting the idea: We must be protected! He felt no one would understand him if he opened up and shared.**

**This power becomes energized through a distorted sense of individuality, independence, and a misunderstanding of adulthood. You see, Jeff, the leaf…”**

**“Stop it! Stop it, Papa! You are sounding more and more like my crazy dreams! I don’t want to hear about the old leaf anymore!”**

**“Jeff?” Papa was taken back by Jeff’s over-zealous comment.**

**“You want to see the leaf? I still have it! Here, here!” Jeff raised his voice as he dashed to another room and quickly returned with the yellowed plastic sleeve.**

**With his facial muscles tightened up and with determination Jeff aggressively separated it at the upper corner and tore the sheets apart. The dried leaf, with its intricate fiber pattern, instantly eroded to dust as it was disbursed on the floor.**

**Jeff jerked his head to catch Papa’s expression and had never seen his big saucer eyes so wide and staring straight into his. Then Papa slowly turned his head, looked down towards the floor, and silently walked out of the apartment.**

**“Jason, I stood there perfectly still, staring at the first spot where our eyes had first met. After I heard the door close, I called, Papa! But he didn’t come back.” Jeff concluded his last thoughts.**

**After a short pause Jeff added, “I realized, Jason, that I had unintentionally hurt Papa very much. Over the next few weeks I went to Papa’s house often and I could hear him moving about in his house, but he wouldn’t answer the door. He must have been very upset with me.**

**As a result, I started to think about Papa’s old leaf more. I felt if somehow, I could figure out the riddle, I may be able to fix things with Papa. Day after day I tried to figure it out: a green leaf turns into an old dried up leaf. Oh, what’s the significance of that?**

**Guilt was driving me through an unrelenting thought pattern, but I wasn’t coming up with any answers.**

**What’s wrong with me? Why… why is it so hard for me to figure this out? I got to the point of frustration and yelled out: Help me!”**

**Jeff ended his thoughts and this chapter of his story to Jason with a sigh of regret, for hurting Papa so profoundly.**

# **CHAPTER NINE**

# **Honesty Blended with Confusion**

**“Jason,” Jeff reiterated. “I had hurt Papa, but without knowing the answer to Papa’s riddle, I felt an apology would be meaningless. If you could have seen the look on his face when he walked out of my apartment, you would understand why I had become so driven to unravel the riddle. I needed some serious help.”**

**“Help me…HELP ME!” Jeff’s volume exploded as his story once again advanced on.**

**Jeff suddenly realized he should restrain himself in their small Dormont backyard. Mrs. Bachorski, who lives directly behind them, was peeking through her kitchen drapes. Then she quickly closed them when she saw Jeff’s head turn towards their house. The neighbors, in general, and Mrs. Bachorski, specifically, might get the urge to call 9-1-1 if he couldn’t manage to control his volume a little better.**

**“You know Jason,” Jeff continued in a modified tone as he turned his head back to his son, “I’m good at throwing my hands up in the air when things get tough.” Jeff humbly admitted as he threw two more good sized branches on their fire. “Papa’s riddle shouldn’t have been so hard for me to figure out and that’s what was so frustrating. It was eating away at me so badly.”**

**“Do you remember hearing an old saying, Jason: Be careful what you ask for – you just might get it?” Jeff formulated the old adage…, and Jason laughed.**

**“Well I got it that very night in the form of yet another dream.”**

**Before the white fog even lifted in this dream, I felt my bare feet on a rocky beach at dawn and heard the waves unfolding against the Mediterranean shoreline.**

**“I survived,” Jeff proclaimed to him-self!**

**“I’ve been a drift in the sea for three days.”**

**And as soon as I completed this brief realization, a desolate arid landscape appeared out of the fog on my right and a vast body of saltwater with its’ unrelenting movement to my left. There wasn’t a living soul in sight.**

**I was wet and cold as I started to walk along the beach.**

**The morning sun quickly burned away a few remaining patches of fog from the coastline. And even though a gentle breeze began to blow in off the water, the temperature grew hot in an hour or two as I continued to trudge along. Soon my body temperature rose to a point in which I began sweating.**

**I needed water! I had nothing to eat or drink during my time at sea.**

**Should I leave my only visual point of reference and go inland to locate fresh water? What if a ship came by while I was gone? It might be my only source of rescue.**

**Oh, I had to have water, so I turned inland. Just as I was moving over the first sand dune, I heard a faint cry: Help. Help me!**

**Turning back towards the sound, I spotted the figure of an older man lying on the beach a few hundred yards away. Oh my, another survivor from the storm. I ran over to him as fast as I could.**

**“Are you okay?” I shouted as I drew near and then stopped short in my tracks.**

**This man wasn’t okay. It looked like his clothes were all full of large irregularly formed holes, but they didn’t appear to be ripped or cut up. And his skin? His skin looked like it was burned. It was red and badly blistered.**

**“What happened to you?” Jeff questioned the stranger. “Did you fall off the same merchant ship, I did?”**

**“Fall… no I didn’t fall off, my boy. The Captain threw me over-board!” proclaimed the man.**

**“He threw you into that stormy sea?” I questioned in shock.**

**“I told him to!” the man confessed. “You see the storm was my fault for running away from God.”**

**I had a hard time wrapping my brain around his last comment. But then I remembered how fierce the storm was when I fell overboard, and it wasn’t long after my fall, the sea turned unexpectedly calm. The storm just dissipated.**

**“What can I do for you?” I replied shaking my head in confusion. “My name is Jeff.”**

**“I’m Jonah. I am in desperate need of food and water. My skin will heal in time, but it would help the pain if we could find some cactus aloe.”**

**“I’m hungry too, Jonah. Let’s see what we can find and we’re both in the need of some fresh clean clothes.” Jeff concluded as he added in, “I smell almost as bad as you.”**

**Jonah gave me a little chuckle as I helped him to his feet. Slowly we made our way inland over one sand dune after another. As we walked further from the coastal shoreline the heat of the day increased ever higher and we were struggling.**

**Three more hours passed, and our needs became critical. There was no water to be found. Jonah was barely keeping up with me. He was pacing himself about five feet behind me. After only ten minutes more had passed, I realized I could no longer hear Jonah’s feet shuffling behind me anymore. I turned and saw Jonah collapsed about fifty feet away.**

**When I turned, my left foot hit a rock and I was so weak my body simply went over and I was unable to move. I just laid there breathing through my mouth and blowing a few grains of sand with each breath. I had no idea how long I spent on the hot sand, but then I jerked and opened my eyes when I felt a hot wet roughly coursed tongue licking my cheek.**

**It was a camel. I rubbed my eyes and cheek as I sat up. Looking around I saw there were a whole mess of camels milling about as they munched on what vegetation they could find. And there were also a bunch of excited men all talking at the same time trying to figure out how to help me.**

**On the other side of their camp I so Jonah propped up against a reclining camel and drinking his fill of water. My heart gave thanks that we had been rescued. One of the strangers then handed me a leather flask of water.**

**By late afternoon both Jonah and I were beginning to feel better. We were both giving thanks a caravan had found us and we had acquired the food, water and clothing we most desperately needed. Our lives were indeed spared.**

**Jonah asked the caravan leader where they were headed.**

**“To the city of Nineveh,” he replied.**

**“Nineveh?” Jonah whispered under his breath.**

**“Yes, Nineveh, that is where I am going too. I must go!” declared Jonah.**

**“You may travel with us if you like,” offered the man in charge.**

**“I would like to, but I’m not strong enough to do so yet. I will rest here for a day or two,” Jonah kindly and humbly replied.**

**With Jonah’s response, the caravan leader decided they would travel on into the night. They needed to make up some time due to their unscheduled rescue of these two strangers.**

**“I’ll stay with you and we can go to Nineveh together, if it’s okay,” Jeff offered.**

**“Thank you, Jeff,” replied Jonah. “I would appreciate the company.”**

**So, Jonah and Jeff built a campfire next to a nearby shade tree which would provide them relief from the next days’ intense heat. They both watched as the caravan disappeared over a distant sand dune in the sunset.**

**Jeff couldn’t help his curiosity concerning the skin burns on Jonah’s body. Jeff had been in the water for three days as well and his body wasn’t burned. He watched as Jonah was applying some aloe on his skin as their campfire now provided their only source of light.**

**“Jonah,” Jeff spoke up, “how did your body get so burned?”**

**“After I was thrown into the sea, I was swallowed up by a great fish,” Jonah declared looking Jeff straight in the eyes. “I am thankful to be alive. It is impossible for me to describe the experience, but after three days the fish spit me out of its mouth onto the beach where you found me.”**

**Stomach acid, thought Jeff, “Oh Jonah, I can’t even imagine how horrible it must have been.”**

**Jeff thought, that is totally crazy! How could someone survive being in the stomach of a fish? He had no further reply and sat there in silence as Jonah finished tending to his burns. The irregular glow of the fire following Jonah’s story was beginning to give Jeff a case of the willies.**

**Jonah however was doing much more than simply tending his burns. He was having an intense conversation with God.**

***“‘You have driven me from your presence, God. How will I ever again see your holy place?***

***I sank beneath the waves, and death was very near. The waters closed in around me, and seaweed wrapped itself around my head. I sank down to the very roots of the mountains. I was locked out of life and imprisoned in the land of the dead. But you have snatched me from the yawning jaws of death!***

***When I had lost all hope, I turned my thoughts once more to you. And my earnest prayer went out to you in your holy place.***

***Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all your mercies.***

***I shall always remember you are with me no matter where I may be.***

***And I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise, and I will fulfill all my vows.***

***God you heard me in my deep despair and ordered the fish to spit me up on the beach, and it did.” 5***

**As Jonah completed his thoughts, he heard God remind him of the initial task he instructed Jonah to complete: “*Get up and go to the great city and deliver the message of judgment I have given to you.” 5***

**Jonah pondered over his talks with God and when he awoke the next morning, he announced to Jeff it was time to leave for Nineveh.**

**“Jonah,” Jeff replied, “are you sure you’ve rested enough? It’s only been one night.”**

**Jonah was already up on his feet, “Yes Jeff, I have waited too long already. Let’s go!”**

**So, with that said they gathered up what little supplies they had and started walking to Nineveh.**

**Jonah had indeed regained his strength for he was now leading the way. They traveled through numerus deserts, valleys, and a desolate mountain range.**

**Jeff had no idea the journey would be so long. They walked an average of about twenty miles a day. It had been almost three weeks before they finally camped on a ridge about two miles west of Nineveh.**

**After dusk the city was aglow with hundreds of torches and they could even hear the faint sounds of a vigorous night life filled with trumpets, drums, and loud voices.**

**“Jonah,” Jeff anxiously questioned, “do you really want to go in there?”**

**“Yes, my friend,” Jonah answered with conviction. “That is Nineveh; and that is our destination. We should try and get a good night’s sleep. We will need all of our strength for tomorrow.”**

**So, Jeff turned his back to the chaos beyond them… laid down, pulled his blanket up to his neck and closed his eyes to rest. Jonah did the same after one more concerned glance at the city.**

**The next day they entered the city and Jonah shouted to the crowds: “*Forty days from now your city will be destroyed!”***

**To Jeff’s surprise *the people believed this message, and from the greatest to the least, they decided to go without food and wear sackcloth to show their sorrow. 5***

**Jeff followed along behind Jonah in disbelief at Jonah’s boldness and courage as he spoke to all these intimidating strangers. Jeff not only observed the people were listening to Jonah, he noticed they seemed to be changing their attitudes.**

***Even when the king heard what Jonah was saying, he stepped down from his throne and took off his royal robes. He dressed himself in sackcloth and sat on a heap of ashes.***

***Then the king and his nobles sent this decree throughout the city: No one may eat or drink anything at all. Everyone is required to wear sackcloth and pray earnestly.***

***Everyone must turn from their evil ways and stop all their violence. Who can tell? Perhaps even yet God will have pity on us and hold back his fierce anger from destroying us.***

***When God saw they had put a stop to their evil ways; the fortieth day passed, and no destruction came upon the city.***

***God had mercy on them and didn’t carry out the destruction Jonah had threatened.***

***Jonah saw this and became very angry. He complained to God about it, saying: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this?***

***That is why I ran away from you! I knew you were a gracious and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. I knew how easily you could cancel your plans for destroying these people.***

***Just kill me now! I’d rather be dead than alive because nothing I predicted is going to happen.” 5***

**Jeff overheard Jonah, thinking Jonah was talking to himself.**

**“Come Jeff,” exploded Jonah, “let us leave this place.”**

**So, they went out through the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under, as Jonah still wanted to see if anything might happen to the city.**

***God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah’s head, shading him from the sun. This eased some of his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant. 5***

**Jeff just shook his head wondering why he shouldn’t just get up and totally leave this crazy old man.**

***The next morning at dawn a worm ate through the stem of the plant, so that it soon died and withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God sent a scorching east-wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die once more.***

***“Death is certainly better than this!” Jonah exclaimed.***

***Then God said, “Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?”***

***Jonah replied, “Yes, even angry enough to die!” 5***

**Jeff was amazed, but some-how he was now hearing God’s words to Jonah as well. He stood up a few feet from Jonah and stared straight at him.**

**Then God said: “*Jonah, you feel sorry about the plant (it gave you shade), though you did nothing to put it there. And a plant is only, at best, short lived.***

***But the city has more than one hundred and twenty thousand people living in evil darkness. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?” 5***

**Oh my, thought Jeff. The leaf, the plant over Jonah! That’s just like Papa’s leaf! It grows but has a short life. I am just like Jonah! Jonah ran away from God, so what am I running away from?**

**Jeff sat down and covered his eyes with both hands. His thoughts turned inward. Is this what Papa had been talking about?**

**Jonah has been selfish about the things he wanted to happen and didn’t care at all about the people of Nineveh.**

**Am I so wrapped up in myself I haven’t been able to think about the people around me?**

**A proverbial light went on in Jeff’s head. Oh Papa, I think now I do understand the gift your mother gave you. A parent’s love for their children is unique and serves as an example how we are to continue in our journey as well.**

**Whoa, too bad that wasn’t the experience I had with my parents. Maybe that’s why it was so hard for me to figure out Papa’s riddle.**

**With my eyes still covered up, the white light returned. I woke up with one thought: I need to see Papa.**

**A knock came at the door and I jumped up to answer it. “Papa!” I exclaimed with anticipation and eagerly opened my door.**

**“Oh Maggie, it’s you,” Jeff’s voice expressed some disappointment.**

**Maggie however had other things on her mind and didn’t notice the cut in his voice. “Jeff, I have been trying to reach you on the phone for days. Your Grandfather is in the hospital.”**

**“What?” Jeff’s focus was now totally on Maggie.**

**“He’s been there for five days now. Where have you been?” she demanded.**

**“I…I’ve been hanging out with some friends,” Jeff said a little squeamishly. He definitely was looking for an easy and believable reply for Maggie’s question.**

**“What’s wrong with him?” Jeff refocused his thoughts.**

**“It’s his heart,” Maggie reported soberly as Jeff immediately headed out of the door.**

**Maggie heard Jeff’s feet shuffling down the staircase as fast as he could manage.**

**“He’s in A.G.H.!” Maggie yelled after him, as her head shook back and forth. “What’s up with him anyway?”**

**5 Jonah 1-4 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER TEN**

# **Reality Unwanted**

**“Why is this happening to Papa? Where are my car keys?” Jeff made his way out of the apartment building but had no keys.**

**“Think…, they’re not in my pockets, check the car. Oh, they’re on the driver’s seat…okay.” Jeff franticly mumbled to himself as he put the key into the ignition and grabbed for his seat belt, “Lets’ go car… get me out of here.”**

**Jeff’s thoughts were now focused solely on Papa, as he tried to rush over to Allegheny General Hospital on the North Side of the city.**

**A heart-attack, that sounds pretty bad. Jeff had a difficult time concentrating on traffic as his mind repeatedly drifted back to Papa’s unknown status.**

**The traffic was on the heavy side and so he slowly made his way through the backups and then decided to bypass the Fort Pitt Tunnel to cross the Ohio River using the West End Bridge. Seasonal road projects and a maze of traffic signals seemed unending, especially those signals which serviced more than four corners.**

**Time seemed to be in a weird warp, although Jeff was making some progress, he felt like time was being wasted or not even in motion. That’s a strange feeling.**

**Finally parked near the hospital, Jeff hastily entered through the main door. The woman working at the information desk located Papa’s room number.**

**Jeff made a beeline through the hospital hallways. Fifth floor, room 547; he wasn’t about to stop and wait for an elevator at this point, so Jeff pumped up the staircase, two steps at a time, one floor after another. Once on the fifth floor, Jeff located the wall plaque to see which direction the room numbers ran.**

**Room 574, 574; just around the corner, what? Papa’s not in this room. Oh, it was 547… so he made a quick about face to head in the opposite direction. Jeff was anxious to see Papa and started to rub his hands together from shear nervousness.**

**Finally, at room 547, he walked purposefully right up to the side of Papa’s hospital bed. With his legs pressed against the bed rails Jeff leaned over and looked down into Papa’s face.**

**Jeff anxiously whispered, “Papa?”**

**Jeff’s volume shot up several notches because his grandfather gave no initial response, “Papa.”**

**“Jeff, I’m glad you’ve come to see an old man.” Papa formed the best smirk he could muster as he opened his eyes to focus on his grandson.**

**“Papa, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to destroy the leaf; promise I didn’t. When the old yellowed pages separated it just turned to dust…and the leaf was gone! I’m very, very sorry!”**

**“Jeff, slow down boy.” Papa calmly tried to relax Jeff’s intense greeting, “The leaf was meant to do that. It was one of its reasons for being.”**

**Jeff let out a sigh of relief as he straightened himself up; “I think I understand now.”**

**“What have you learned about the leaf?” Papa asked and then watched Jeff’s eyebrows move in closer to one another.**

**“I think the leaf has to do with our time here on earth and maybe how we spend it?”**

**“Yes…Yes!” Papa sat halfway up in his excitement and Jeff placed both hands on Papa’s shoulders to lower him back to a reclining position.**

**“Woe…slow down a little you crazy-old man and rest your head back on your pillow,” Jeff directed with compassion. Papa’s I.V. line had almost stretched out too far.**

**“Jeff you are on the right track; keep thinking in the same direction.” Papa had a hard time containing himself as his head once again lifted off his pillow. “You will find there is more yet to be revealed!”**

**“Papa can’t you just tell me?” Jeff prodded out of frustration.**

**“No!” Papa sounded irritated as he lowered his head back onto the pillow. “Everything loses some of its value when you don’t figure it out for yourself.”**

**Jeff relinquished on his request, “Okay…there’s more…okay I won’t ask again.”**

**Papa moved on to another topic. “Jeff my boy, do you see the carpenters nail on the tray at the foot of my bed? Would you give it to me, please?”**

**Jeff stepped to the foot of the bed and picked up a three-inch galvanized nail off the tray. “Where did this come from, Papa?” Jeff questioned as he carefully scanned the nail.**

**“I asked hospital maintenance to find one for me. Thank you.” Papa replied as Jeff stepped closer to him and seemed relieved as Jeff placed the nail in the palm of his hand.**

**The local news was on Papa’s TV and Jeff turned his head to watch. Instantly, Jeff heard a thud and a cry of anguish come from Papa. To Jeff’s amazement Papa had thrust the nail through the palm of his hand against the top of his nightstand.**

**The adrenalin in Jeff’s body instantly peaked as he reached for the call button on Papa’s bed. “What did you do you crazy-old man?” Jeff shouted. But papa grabbed Jeff’s wrist with his other hand before Jeff could reach the button.**

**“No, Jeff!” Papa’s volume even surprised Jeff and his eyes immediately focused back onto his grandfather’s eyes. “Listen to me! I will be fine. I want you to remove the nail from my hand, place it in that surgical glove over there and put it in your pocket.”**

**“What?” Jeff gasped.**

**“You heard me, son. Just do it now!” Papa insisted.**

**Still in shock Jeff did what his grandfather had instructed. The actual extraction was unnerving for Jeff and sweat was beginning to run down his forehead. Jeff’s face made an array of distorted expressions, as Papa tightly squished his eyes and lips shut anticipating the emanate pain to come.**

**Jeff took one quick breath, held it and gave the nail a hardy pull. A sigh of relief was heard from both men.**

**With the nail pulled out, Jeff slipped it into the awaiting glove and quickly slid it into his righthand pants pocket.**

**“Jeff, you see the roll of gauze on the other table over there?” Papa instructed quickly.**

**Jeff nodded his head rapidly three times in succession.**

**“Get the gauze and wrap it around my hand firmly.”**

**Jeff’s head again nodded like a cock-pin on a repeating revolver and did as he was told.**

**Then Papa calmly instructed: “Hold my hand tightly and have a seat.”**

**It was only at this point Jeff’s blood pressure started to calm down and everything which had happened in the last thirty seconds began to surface in his brain and piece together.**

**The nail had actually missed any large arteries in Papa’s hand and as Jeff sat there holding on tightly, he could sense the bleeding was coming under control.**

**There was silence between both of them for over thirty minutes. Papa mostly had his eyes closed and appeared to be resting comfortably.**

**Jeff, however, could still make no sense of what just happened and waited for something to break the awkward feeling in the pit of his stomach. Then Jeff remembered his grandfather’s lack of response when he first entered the room and instantly shook Papa to bring him around, ‘Papa!’ Jeff stood up and leaned in towards Papa’s face.**

**“Jeff my lad,” Papa said as his slowly opened his eyes. “I wanted to give you a new gift; one which would be part of me, so you won’t forget me.”**

**Jeff slowly mumbled in confusion, “The nail?”**

**“Yes Jeff, the nail. It has my blood on it and you will remember.”**

**Papa continued, “The nail also has a new message which is only for you to understand, just as the leaf has. You must not stop until you have figured out both of them. It must be both!”**

**Papa began to cough uncontrollably. Jeff called for the nurse, but Papa stopped coughing and continued on.**

**“Take the nail home with you and seal it in a plastic bag. The blood contains my DNA and it will help you to stay focused, and not forget all you have learned in the last eight months.”**

**“Papa, you make it sound like… like you won’t be here.” Jeff said awkwardly.**

**“I won’t be here lad. I am like the old leaf in many ways and I feel like the seal on my container has been opened, too.”**

**Jeff didn’t want to believe a single word his grandfather had said, but deep down he knew it was true. Some-how he knew.**

**Jeff made no verbal reply when Papa had stopped talking, but carefully removed the bloody gauze from Papa’s hand. He noticed the wound had closed up and the bleeding had all but stopped. Jeff gently cleaned up both sides of Papa’s hand and rewrapped it with new gauze. Quietly he remained at his grandfather’s side.**

**The day was passing while other family members and friends came and went. Maggie spent about two hours trying to keep Jeff’s mind off Papa as much as she could. As Maggie was about to leave, Jeff asked her to wait for a few minutes so he could visit the bathroom in Papa’s room.**

**While he was gone, Papa whispered to Maggie, “Young lady, I’ve been watching you two; you keep a good watch over Jeff when I’m gone, okay? I think he will listen to you.”**

**Maggie gave a sober smile, “I’ll do my best. I…”**

**The bathroom door opened, and Maggie redirected her thoughts to an emotional goodbye to Papa McGivney with a kiss on his forehead. As she turned to leave, she gave Papa another little smile and a nod.**

**“Bye Jeff, call me later when you can.” Maggie concluded as she reached the door.**

**“Bye Maggie; thanks for coming by.” Jeff said as he gave her a little hug and took a seat next to Papa.**

**Papa slept most of the time now, however occasionally he was able to greet a visitor with a small smile but was no longer able to speak.**

**Jeff never left Papa’s side. He constantly reviewed their conversations from the morning and feared if he left the room there would be a risk of Papa slipping away into death. That thought alone, paralyzed Jeff and haunted him continually.**

**About 8:00 P.M. Jeff jumped to his feet after one more of his early morning reflections.**

**“Papa,” Jeff burst forth. Papa moaned as he opened his eyes. “You’re awake Papa!”**

**“Yes, but I’m very tired,” Papa slowly replied; he seemed to have very little energy despite his long knap.**

**“You’re going to be fine Papa. You have to believe this.” Jeff whispered with assurance.**

**“Jeff, I will be fine however it won’t be to your liking. The truth is…”**

**“Papa, no,” Jeff interrupted. “Truth, I don’t know what truth is anymore. How does anyone know what is true or not?”**

**Papa barely had enough energy to utter, “Remember the leaf, the nail.”**

**“Oh Papa, what are you talking about? How can truth be found in those things? I don’t even know where to look for truth.”**

**Papa forced out, “That’s because you ask the wrong question!”**

**“What?” Jeff was confused. “What did you say?”**

**“You ask: How can I know what is true? Truth is not a… what.” Papa was fading and Jeff moved in closer to his face. Jeff could barely hear Papa now.**

**“You ask the wrong question Jeff. Ask instead ‘Who’ is truth? My gifts will help you in your search.”**

**“Papa no,” Jeff winced with a tear rolling down his cheek.**

**With as much effort as he could muster, Papa forced out his resolute response once more, “Who! Not what!”**

**And with those last three words, Papa took his last breath.**

# **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

# **Confessions Revisited**

**As Jeff was finishing his story about Papa’s passing-away he noticed the declining status of the fire in their fire pit and used this observation for his advantage.**

**“Jason, will you help me get some more firewood from our reserve pile?” Jeff was intentionally trying to gather his thoughts together. “Our supply of wood here is getting low.”**

**“Sure Pop. You never told me about Papa before. You two were close, weren’t you?” Jason continued on with a youthful passion as they both made their way to the main wood supply on the side of the house.**

**“Yes, son and like with so many other people in my life, I didn’t know just how much I loved and depended on Papa until he was gone.” Jeff was beginning to get choked up as they walked back and restocked the wood pile near the fire pit.**

**As they were in the process of sitting back down, Jeff reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small plastic bag.**

**Jason looked at it in awe, “Pop it’s the nail. Is that Papa’s nail?”**

**“Yes son,” Jeff said with pride as he passed the nail over to Jason. “It’s yours now. Take good care of it.”**

**“Thank you, Pop I’ll put it in a very special place,” Jason replied. He eyed the contents of the bag with reverence and then carefully slipped it into his pocket.**

**“The nail has been a precious reminder of Papa for me all these years. It’s my hope that in some way it will be of help to you as well,” Jeff ended his thought.**

**“Thank you, so much,” Jason whole-heartedly repeated.**

**“Son, when Papa died, I took it very hard. I turned away from everyone else who really cared for me and spent almost all my time with other friends.”**

**Jeff didn’t give a second thought to any of the words he brought forth now. He was finally at peace.**

**“Jason, the so-called friends I turned to really weren’t friends at all as it turned out. They just wanted to use me to my ultimate destruction. They were the ones I was buying drugs from and using on a daily basis.”**

**“Pop?” Jason couldn’t believe his ears.**

**“You see, son, I’m not telling you this because you need to know people make poor choices. Anyone can and will do things they will regret. I’m telling you about my bad experiences, because you need to know a person’s life doesn’t need to continue down such a path.” Jeff began to faulter.**

**“Jason, I was driven by loneliness.” Jeff exhaled his breath and some penned-up emotions. “And without Papa, I felt there was no one else to turn to, so I didn’t talk to anyone about my troubles.**

**Loneliness is an awful thing, Jason. I felt hopeless and attempted to fill that hole with anything in my grasp. Drugs were just too easy to get ahold of.”**

**Jeff raised his head a little to gaze directly into Jason’s eyes, “Oh, your mom and the guys were still around. They wanted to help, but I was stubborn. How was I to share my dreams, my fears, with them? It was hard enough to let Papa in.**

**These were my peers and in many ways were the only real family I had left. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything. I felt they would either laugh at me or even worse, walk out of my life. At least that’s what I thought at the time.**

**Jason, you remember yesterday I mentioned those two sets of friends?”**

**“Yeah, Pop. You said Mom and the kids in your neighborhood didn’t know the other group of kids.” Jason did a fine job of capsulizing his memory of his dad’s earlier presentation.**

**“Right, well those other friendships all began when I was about sixteen and a new kid moved into our school district.” Jeff continued after his dramatic confession.**

**He moved on to fill in more details for Jason. Zechariah was his name and he became very popular at school. He was on the football team and became captain of the basketball team in our senior year at Steward High School.**

**Zechariah invited me over to his house for a party one Saturday evening in the fall of our senior year. I thought I was someone special if this popular kid at school invited me to his home. Little did I know my life was about to take a dreadful turn.**

**Party night turned out to be a warm evening; we call such weather, Indian summer when the warmth occurs so late in the season. It’s a wonderful time just before the first real cold snap moves in. There were a lot of older kids milling around at the party and it was there I was introduced to Rudy.**

**Rudy seemed nice enough; he was also self-confident, opinionated, and had a charisma about him which drew people around him. By the end of the party though, I found out what was really drawing the attention.**

**He gave me a friendly light punch in the arm and said he had something to give me. Come with me, he said, and I followed him through the backyard and ended up behind the garage.**

**“Jason, this is hard for me to put into words,” Jeff hesitated. “Rudy pulled out a hand-full of cigarette like objects from his pocket, Marijuana.”**

**“It won’t hurt you!” Rudy began, “Try it, it’s free. No charge… for you!”**

**“What?” I replied out of surprise.**

**I was looking down at what Rudy was holding in his hand; my eyebrows raised up without moving my head as I quickly looked at Rudy, and then back at the contents he was holding out for me.**

**I may not be the brightest kid in school, but I knew what Rudy was offering me. I thought to myself; what am I going to do?**

**I didn’t want to be seen as a little kid or unable to handle it, so I ended up taking it from Rudy and had a smoke. Two or three more, soon followed. I was amazed at what was going on in my head, but the feeling didn’t last.**

**In the morning my head and body felt horrible. I heard the sounds of children playing and crows squawking in the distance; I opened my eyes to realize I was still behind Zechariah’s garage. I began shivering from the early morning October chill in the air.**

**What happened? This is so unreal; what should I do now?**

**Pulling myself together, I made my way home and covered the whole thing up by telling my parents Zechariah had invited me to sleep over. They accepted my statement without question and to my great relief.**

**But it wasn’t over. As badly as I felt, I was craving more. I had to ask Zechariah for Rudy’s phone number. He gave it to me and mumbled under his breath: What took you so long, man?**

**I found out quickly more Marijuana wasn’t free. It cost me. Boy, did it cost me! I didn’t have enough money, nor did I know where it would come from.**

**Jason, I started stealing things and selling them for any amount of money I could. But as my habit grew, there wasn’t ever enough money to cover the expense.**

**“Pop, I see now why you are so concerned for me.” Jason broke into his dad’s story. “I can tell you I’m not into the drug scene. My buddies thought stealing from the mall would be fun, you know; an emotional rush. I know we were wrong; I’m truly sorry.”**

**“Thank you, Jason. I believe you, and your Mom and I are proud of you.” Jeff intentionally made it clear his son knew where he stood.**

**Jeff wished his parents could have been more understanding towards him. But he was getting arrested time after time for Marijuana possession and his parents were totally disgusted with him. They didn’t really care to be part of his life to begin with, and so they distanced themselves even further.**

**All Jeff could see in their eyes when they looked at him was the word loser.**

**As soon as Jeff graduated from high school, he found himself a little apartment. The family arguments dropped back considerably, but temptation stared him straight in the face. Jeff only got more involved in drugs.**

**This was about the time when Jeff’s dreams had started, and he was very uneasy about them. Did they have a connection with his addiction? Oh, how could they; Jeff was trying his hardest to rationally separate any connection between the two issues.**

**Jeff was becoming so confused he didn’t know what to think. That’s also when Papa’s visits started, and even Maggie came by to talk on occasion.**

**Maggie said her parents didn’t want her to see Jeff anymore and she pleaded with him to stand up for himself and to do what he knew was right, and not simply do what he felt like doing in the moment.**

**Maggie’s comments struck home with Jeff, but he had no idea how that would work.**

**The things Maggie said, however, did set the stage for another one of Jeff’s new crazy dreams, which came upon him the same night as their visit.**

**“Jason, I know this must be very confusing and hard for you to hear, but during that time in my life I had no one and nowhere to turn.” Jeff was now fishing for any response from his son.**

**“Pop,” Jason replied. “It’s hard for me to take this all in. I don’t know what to say. You’re my Dad and I can’t imagine you going through all of this. How did you survive?”**

**“Well, Jason, I’ll come to that, but let me continue on with the story so you can better understand why we are having this whole conversation now, okay?” Jeff summarized.**

**“Okay Pop.” Jason replied as he threw more wood onto the fire.**

# **CHAPTER TWELVE**

# **Standing Up?**

**Jeff and his son continued to sit beside the fire for several hours as Jeff soulfully unfolded more of the details of his shadowy past.**

**Jason, your Mom and I had ended our last visit about four hours ago, but what she said about standing up for my-self kept echoing in my head. Maggie seems to know me better than I know myself. Why do I have such a hard time making decisions? Or maybe I should really say: making choices which don’t pull me down.**

**I had been letting people walk all over me for a long time. Look at Rudy, why couldn’t I simply say no to him and walk away? He brought so much turmoil into my life. I then began to think… oh, maybe it’s not really Rudy at all; maybe it’s just me.**

**I also thought again about Jonah and how selfish he appeared to be, and how I seemed to be so much like him. Jonah did eventually do what God had asked him to do, but then got mad because God had compassion for those unsavory characters who lived in Nineveh. Was Jonah’s anger justified or not?**

**Oh, I don’t know the answer to that question. I can’t even take care of myself, let alone know if Jonah was right or wrong. What’s wrong with me? Can’t I do anything right? I was a pretty good student despite my active lifestyle. Why is my life so messed up now?**

**My mind kept rolling over topic after topic until my brain simply had enough. The neon-lights from the businesses across the street were flashing in my apartment window. Lights or no lights, I just laid my head on the arm of the sofa and fell asleep. I was exhausted.**

**Jason, it’s not as though I have any control over my thought patterns, so soon enough I slid into a new dream.**

**As quickly as the bright light blinded me, it began to fade and reveal a beautiful palace courtyard. There were mammoth colonnades encircling the courtyard with gold and marble statues interspersed throughout the area. In the center was a beautifully manicured garden.**

**Then, I noticed in the center of it all, there was a magnificent fountain with an eight-foot high water spray. The sound of the falling water was accompanied by an array of exotic bird calls. I was amazed at the garden’s beauty and splendor.**

**I also realized I wasn’t standing there alone. An official of the king was speaking to me: “Jeff, by order of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, you have been appointed to oversee the young men from Judah, who have been brought from their homeland as captives to serve his majesty.”**

**“Me… the King is putting me in charge?” Jeff anxiously questioned the official.**

**“Yes, you Jeff! And there better not be any problems or you will be held accountable,” the official responded as the captive men were escorted into the courtyard by the guards.**

**Jeff quickly assessed the men and determined they looked generally about his own age. They also looked unkempt from a long journey and in need of rest. Jeff got the impression these young men were angry and rebellious, simply by the looks in their eyes and in their general demeanor.**

**“Well, for my own sake,” Jeff mumbled, “I guess I must do my best to keep order.”**

**The official continued to explain only the strongest, healthiest, and good-looking young men were selected.**

**“It is your job, Jeff, to make sure they are well versed in every branch of learning, are gifted with knowledge and good sense, and have the poise needed to serve in the royal palace. Teach these young men the language and literature of the Babylonians.”**

**Jeff didn’t say anything but felt this sounded like quite a tall order. How was he to do all this?**

**Then the Official introduced Jeff to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, all from the tribe of Judah. “These four especially will be under your direct supervision.”**

**As Jeff began to work with these young men of Judah, he found them to be eager learners. Jeff was very pleased his first impressions turned out to be unfounded. He quickly grew to have great respect for all four of them, especially for the one named Daniel. Daniel was unusually gifted with wisdom.**

***When the three-year training period ordered by the king was completed, the chief official brought all the young men to King Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with each of them, and none of them impressed him as much as Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.* 6**

**Jeff was much relieved at the king’s proclamation. *Nebuchadnezzar appointed all four to his regular staff of advisers. In all matters requiring wisdom and balanced judgment, the king found the advice of these young men to be ten times better than that of all the magicians and enchanters in his entire kingdom. 6***

**Jeff couldn’t have been prouder of Daniel and his friends. After all this work and companionship, Jeff also counted these captives as his personal friends as well.**

***One night, King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream which disturbed him so much he couldn’t sleep. He called in his magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers, and he demanded they tell him what he had dreamed.***

***They all stood stunned before the king, so he repeated himself for emphasis, ‘I have had a dream that troubles me. Tell me what I dreamed, for I must know what it means.’***

***Then the astrologers answered the king in Aramaic, “Long live the king, tell us the dream, and we will tell you what it means.”***

***But the king said to the astrologers, “I am serious about this. If you don’t tell me what my dream was and then what it means, you will be torn limb from limb, and your houses will be demolished into heaps of rubble! But, if you tell me what I dreamed and what the dream means, I will give you many wonderful gifts and honors.”***

***“Just tell me the dream and what it means!” The King repeated bluntly.***

***The wise men collected their thoughts and nervously repeated themselves one more time, “Please Your Majesty. Tell us the dream…, and we will tell you what it means.”***

***The king replied, “I can see through your trick! You are trying to stall for time because you know I am serious about what I said. If you don’t tell me the dream, you will be condemned. You have conspired to tell me lies in hopes that something will change.”***

**The King was getting quite agitated and raised the volume of his voice.  *“Now, tell me the dream, and then I will know that you can tell me what it means.”***

***Upon hearing the king, the wisemen all spoke among themselves which produced one single wave of exploding sound. Finally, the meeting room returned to an awkward silence.***

***The astrologers replied to the king, “There isn’t a man alive who can tell Your Majesty his dream! And no king, however great and powerful, has ever asked such a thing of any magician, enchanter, or astrologer!***

***This is an impossible thing the king requires. No one except the gods can tell you your dream, and they do not live among people.”***

***The king was furious when he heard this, and* after he dismissed them all from his sight, *he sent out orders to execute all the wise men of Babylon. And because of the king’s decree, men were sent to find and kill Daniel and his friends as well.***

***When Arioch, the commander of the king’s guard, came to kill them, Daniel handled the situation with wisdom and discretion. He asked Arioch, “Why has the King issued such a harsh decree?” So, Arioch told him all that had happened. 6***

**Daniel went at once to see the King and requested more time so he might be able to tell the King what the dream meant. The King granted Daniel’s request reluctantly out of his respect for Daniel’s wisdom.**

**As the King turned to leave the reception room, he mumbled to himself: “I’ll give Daniel one day. He is trying to trick me just like all the others. They will all see my power and beg for mercy before their end comes.”**

**Daniel, unaware eminent death was so close, went home and told his friends Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah what had happened. *He urged them to ask the God of Heaven to show them his mercy by telling them the secret, so they would not be executed along with the other wise men of Babylon.***

***That night the secret was revealed to Daniel in a vision.***

***Then Daniel praised the God of Heaven, saying, “Praise the name of God forever and ever, for you alone have all wisdom and power.***

***You determine the course of world events; you remove kings and set others on the throne. You give wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the scholars. You reveal deep and mysterious things and know what lays hidden in darkness, though you are surrounded by light.***

***I thank and praise you for you have given me wisdom and strength. You have told me what we asked of you and revealed to us what the King demanded.”***

***Then Daniel went to see Arioch and said, “Don’t kill the wise men. Take me to the King, and I will tell him the meaning of the dream.” 6***

**Jeff overheard all that was said and looked on in disbelief.**

**“Daniel, are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Jeff hesitantly asked.**

**“It will be fine, my friend.” Daniel replied. “You will see.”**

***Then Arioch quickly took Daniel to the King and said, “I have found one of the captives from Judah who will tell Your Majesty the meaning of your dream!”***

***The King said to Daniel, “Is this true? Can you tell me what my dream was and what it means?”***

***Daniel replied, “While Your Majesty was sleeping, you dreamed about coming events. The revealer of mysteries has shown you what is going to happen. And it is not because I am wiser than any living person that I know the secret of your dream, but because God wanted you to understand what you were thinking about.***

***Your-Majesty, in your vision you saw in front of you a huge and powerful statue of a man shining brilliantly, frightening, and awesome. The head of the statue was made of fine gold, its chest and arms were of silver, its belly and thighs were of bronze, its legs were of iron, and its feet were a combination of iron and clay.***

***But as you watched, a rock was cut from a mountain by supernatural means. It struck the feet of iron and clay, smashing them to bits. The whole statue collapsed into a heap of iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold.***

***The pieces were crushed as small as chaff on a threshing floor, and the wind blew them all away without a trace. But the rock that knocked the statue down became a great mountain that covered the whole earth.” 6***

**Jeff became sweaty and nervous. This whole dream was even more bazar than any of his own dreams and wondered how the King would react.**

***“That was the dream,” Daniel continued; “now I will tell Your Majesty what it means. Your Majesty, you are a king over many kings. The God of heaven has given you sovereignty, power, strength, and honor. He has made you ruler over-all the inhabited world and has put even the animals and birds under your control. You are the head of gold.***

***But after your kingdom comes to an end, another great kingdom, inferior to yours; will rise to take your place. After that kingdom has fallen, yet a third great kingdom, represented by the bronze belly and thighs, will rise to rule the world. Following that kingdom, there will be a fourth great kingdom, as strong as iron. That kingdom will smash and crush all previous empires, just as iron smashes and crushes everything it strikes.***

***The feet and toes you saw that were a combination of iron and clay show that this kingdom will be divided. Some parts of it will be as strong as iron, and others as weak as clay. This mixture of iron and clay also shows that these kingdoms will try to strengthen themselves by forming alliances with each other through intermarriage. But this will not succeed, just as iron and clay do not mix.***

***During the reigns of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed; no one will ever conquer it. It will shatter all these kingdoms into nothingness, but it will stand forever. That is the meaning of the rock cut from the mountain by supernatural means, crushing to dust the statue of iron, bronze, clay, silver, and gold.***

***The great God has shown Your Majesty what will happen in the future. The dream is true, and its meaning is certain.” Daniel concluded with confidence.***

***Then King Nebuchadnezzar bowed to the ground before Daniel and worshiped him, and he commanded his people to offer sacrifices and burn sweet incense before him.***

***The King said to Daniel, “Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord over kings, a revealer of mysteries, for you have been able to reveal this secret.” 6***

**Jeff was so overwhelmed with relief he produced an audible sigh; the King turned his head with a jerk and briefly gave Jeff an odd sort of a look. Many of the wise men in the court had also come to hear Daniel and grumbled among themselves.**

***Then the King appointed Daniel to a high position and gave him many valuable gifts. He made Daniel ruler over the whole province of Babylon, as well as chief over all his wise men. At Daniel’s request, the King appointed Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to be in charge of all affairs of the province of Babylon, while Daniel remained in the king’s court. 6***

**All the King’s announcements made the other court’s regular staff furious and they stormed out of the palace. Jeff was also profoundly impacted, but even though he heard it all, Jeff could not fully understand what he had just witnessed.**

**“I don’t know what just happened, Daniel?” Jeff exclaimed, “but you stayed true to your beliefs. I am amazed!”**

**“Jeff, God can do anything. Why should this amaze you?” Daniel responded once again in full confidence.**

**“I don’t know this God of yours, but my eyes have seen you stand fast and not compromise when face-to-face with hardship.”**

**Jeff was beginning to open up to Daniel, but immediately sensed himself being drawn into the dense fog and light.**

**He woke up and thought this dream to be the craziest dream on record.**

**The timing of this dream seemed to be very strange as well; first there was Maggie’s challenge last evening, which was closely followed by the dream itself.**

**Could Maggie have known a dream would follow? No way.**

**I thought Daniel was a very wise young man and seemed to make good choices with ease. Maggie certainly doesn’t think I could be as wise as Daniel?**

**Oh… I’m not like Daniel at all. I have a hard time figuring things out.**

**This was just another one of those dreams. How could this be of any value to me?**

**Jason, instead of experiencing the light which surrounds me in my dreams, I felt like I was being sucked into a dark cloud, a dark place, and I didn’t know how I could ever get out of it. I wished Papa were still here.**

**6 Daniel 1-2 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

# **Poor Choices**

**Sunday afternoon was almost gone, and Jeff felt a slight urge to bring his story to a close. But then a small voice inside of him broke into his thoughts and reminded Jeff of the earlier challenge his wife gave him: Jeff, do you love Jason enough to tell him? Don’t… stop… trying!**

**Jeff sat up a little taller as he thought yet again: Maggie’s right. I must continue on. I must tell Jason all of my past! I do love him so much!**

**Jeff instantly collected his thoughts, audibly cleared his throat and threw more kindling into the fire pit. Then with a revitalized conviction in his voice, Jeff continued deeper into his past.**

**“Jason, at that point in my life, I was on a weird type of auto-pilot. I was using drugs regularly but still felt I was able to function.” Jeff audibly cleared his throat, “Looking back now, that’s quite a convoluted mindset to have. I know now my chances for survival were much bleaker than I could have possibly imagined.**

**Oh, I had my apartment, though struggled to meet my rent payments from a meager part-time job. My employment was in itself an on and off affair, as I had trouble holding on to a job, for poor attendance and low performance standards on my part.**

**I wasn’t very proud of myself but still driven none-the-less, if you catch my drift Jason. I kept promising myself; I will not fail. I will find a way out of this.”**

**“Pop?” Jason threw into the dialog, “you are certainly full of surprises. I thought I was the only one who had a hard time making a right decision.”**

**“No Jason, I can assure you, you’re not the only one.” Jeff continued, “for me, I guess I had used the term -able to function- much too loosely. There certainly wasn’t a lot of clarity in my thought process back then.**

**Well, Jason, the days and weeks seemed to melt into each other during this period of time. There was really no point at looking at my wall calendar. I was barely managing to hold things together. Time simply continued on its own relentless journey.”**

**Jason was fully absorbed in his dad’s story and didn’t even want to make a move which might throw his dad’s train of thought off.**

**This seemed to be working because Jeff continued to push ahead to the next significant episode on his rather pathetic journey back then.**

**Both Zechariah and Jeff were hanging out together more during those days. And well, Zechariah wasn’t doing much better than he was.**

**Rudy was constantly on both of them to pay up what was owed. Yet, he still gave them a supply of drugs without question.**

**Jeff continued, “Jason, I know now Rudy’s main goal was to keep us dependent; he had us exactly where he wanted us. One evening Zechariah and I were hanging out at my place playing checkers and Rudy came by.”**

**“Oh checkers,” Rudy opened up the conversation as he walked in the door.**

**“You want to play the winner in the next game?” Zechariah offered, “There’s a beer in the Frig, if you like.”**

**Rudy calmly replied, “No thanks; never have had much interest in checkers. I will take you up on that beer you offered though, and I have some new stuff for you both to try.”**

**We asked Rudy what it was, but he simply replied to the tune of: oh, you’ll like it, trust me!**

**The next morning, I woke up in a hospital bed and Maggie was standing over me. I had an I.V. line attached to my arm and an oxygen tube up my nose.**

**“Maggie?” I asked in a dazed state of mind. “‘What happened? Where am I?”**

**“You’re in Allegheny General Hospital and I thought we were going to lose you last night!” she responded with tears falling onto my bed sheets.**

**“What happened?” I repeated as I reached up with both of my hands in an attempt to hold my head steady.**

**“Jeff, according to the Police report you called 9-1-1 last night after Zechariah went unconscious. By the time the responders got there, you were unconscious too.”**

**“Really…” Jeff sounded off as he lowered his arms.**

**“Yes really, Jeff.” Maggie echoed back. “Apparently after your call to 9-1-1, Jeff, you called me. I answered but there was no response; I heard you breathing and then the phone hit the floor. I was scared!”**

**“Where’s Zechariah?” Jeff questioned as he scanned an unoccupied bed in his room.**

**“Jeff… Zechariah didn’t make it.” Maggie reluctantly revealed. “The police want to talk with you when you’re stabilized. What’s going on Jeff?”**

**Jeff remained quiet. His thoughts were now focused on Zechariah and racing to figure out how he was going to get out of this seemingly impossible mess.**

**Well, Jeff ended up telling the police a whole lot of lies about how he and Zechariah got ahold of the bad drugs off the street. Then in a few days Jeff was released from the hospital and he was allowed to go back to his apartment.**

**Two days later, Rudy had the nerve to knock on his door.**

**Jeff opened his door and acknowledged Rudy under a muffled breath, “What do you want?”**

**“Sorry to hear about Zechariah.” Rudy proclaimed entering the living room.**

**“Sorry! You are sorry?” Jeff rebutted with indignation.**

**“Zechariah is dead! Dead, Rudy! And you are sorry?” Jeff yelled as he headed into the kitchen. “Get out of here!”**

**“Woe, woe, slow-down man.” Rudy pressed on, “You need me, man. I am sorry about Zechariah, but you have known for a while this can happen, right?”**

**“Right, you know it’s a risk that’s out there.” Rudy finished his thought and sat down on a kitchen stool.**

**Jeff was silent for a moment, “Yeah…I know, man. What are you here for anyway?”**

**Rudy kept silent. Jeff then turned angry upon noticing the unfinished checkerboard game he and Zechariah had been playing. It was still resting lifeless on his coffee table.**

**“I’m sure you’re not here to play checkers!” Jeff threw in loudly after Rudy’s continued silence.**

**Jeff hit the corner of the game board and sent all the pieces flying.**

**After the last game piece came to a silent rest, Rudy coldly declared, “No…not here to play checkers. I want to talk with you about your out-standing bill.”**

**“What?” Jeff snorted, “why do you want to talk about that now?”**

**“Because I’m getting pressured on my end and its guys like you that need to pay-up.” Rudy confessed, “I don’t have a choice; I’ll give you three days.”**

**“I can’t get that kind of money in three days or even three months. You know that Rudy.”**

**“I know, Jeff. But there are other ways to clear your debt.” Rudy declared as he quickly raised and then lowered his eyebrows.**

**“What are you suggesting to me, Rudy?” Jeff shot off, “You want me to rob a bank or steal something else worth lots of money?”**

**“No! I wasn’t thinking of anything… like those ideas.” Rudy replied calmly.**

**Jeff reasoned, “Oh, so you have a plan?”**

**“Yes, Jeff, I was thinking you might want to start selling for me.” Rudy dropped his thought right into Jeff’s lap.**

**“No, no, no…” Jeff replied in shock and his voice cracked, “I’m not going to do it!”**

**Rudy pressed on, “I don’t think you have much of a choice, man. If you start selling for me, I’ll start by cutting your debt in half. And if you do well, you can get everything you need for your own use, free. Think about it, Jeff.”**

**Jeff’s mind was racing. He was in the worst fix he’d ever been in. Rudy’s idea was awful, but Jeff couldn’t think of any response which might cause Rudy to back down.**

**Oh, he did think about Papa and knew he wouldn’t have approved. Maggie would certainly have nothing to do with him, if she ever found out.**

**Jeff even thought about some of his crazy dreams in which the characters mostly tried to stand their ground when faced with adversity.**

**Those are just dreams; they aren’t real Jeff rationalized. I need a real solution for this problem. I’ll have to do what Rudy wants.**

**“Okay, Rudy, I’ll do it. I don’t like it, but I’ll do it.” Jeff forced out with a somewhat reluctant resolve in his voice.**

**“Good man, I knew you would see it my way.” Rudy continued, “I have picked out a discreet corner in downtown Pittsburgh. Be there at 11 P.M. this Friday night; I’ll supply you with everything you need. The only people you are to sell to will be those who tell you: Nick sent me.”**

**“Nick you say?” Jeff questioned.**

**“Not Rudy? Is Rudy even your name?”**

**“That is none of your business Jeff,” Rudy snarled. “It would be better for the both of us, if we dropped the subject right here.”**

**And dropped it was. Friday night came and I had everything I needed in a backpack. I drove north/east on West Liberty Avenue and through the Liberty Tunnel. The intersection Rudy directed me to, was near.**

**I drove over the bridge to cross the Monongahela River and parked near the targeted corner at 11:03 P.M. and then waited. My heart was pounding and sweat beads were beginning to form on my brow. Ten to fifteen minutes passed, and I was very nervous. It seemed like I had been sitting there for hours.**

**This was enough, bad idea from the start! My hand began reaching for the key in the ignition. I was getting out of there.**

**But then someone knocked on the passenger window and called: “Hay, Nick sent me. You know Nick?”**

**I took a quick breath, nodded and told the intruder: “Ayah, I know him.”**

**Two other people were approaching as well, so I grabbed my backpack and stepped out of the car.**

**I was hit by a strong December gust-of-wind off the river as I circled around the back of the car and onto the sidewalk. There were no further introductions made or needed with these strangers; I made sure I positioned my stance so that my back was to the wind. The small group formed a tight little circle to prevent anyone else from seeing what we were doing.**

**I completed three sales and as soon as the third person handed me the money, it was over. Five police officers appeared from three different locations. We were all told to freeze and to lie down on the ground. My heart sank as my hands were cuffed behind my back and I was placed in the backseat of a police car.**

**We were all booked at the local precinct, but all those who were buying from me were given a court date for a hearing and were released. I was held over for a bond hearing and charged with possession of drugs, selling drugs, intending to sell drugs, and corruption of minors, along with a few other charges.**

**There was no way I could raise any bail money, so there I sat.**

**“Well, Jason, this was bad.” Jeff interrupted his story.**

**Jeff knew the next part of his story was going to be even harder to hear. He had not verbalized or even recalled the next part of his history for many years.**

**Jeff felt the urge to temporarily change his approach, “Let’s see what your mom has for dinner and if you like, we can rebuild the fire and finish the story after our batteries have been recharged. Okay?”**

**“Pop, I’m amazed and don’t know what to say,” Jason replied. “I definitely would like you to finish the story. Vince will never believe this. Thank you for taking all this time just for me.”**

**“You’re welcome son,” Jeff replied with a smile, and messed up Jason’s hair with three or four comforting rubs of his hand.**

**Jeff was relieved, for he needed a break from the story more than Jason. It had been a long afternoon and with the sun getting low it was past their family’s normal dinner hour anyway.**

**Maggie made one of the family’s favorite comfort meals and then called the girls down from their room. Mealtime was good, but quieter than normal. Maggie and Jeff occasionally exchanged eye contact. She was very curious about how the talk was going, but Jeff couldn’t say anything in front of the little kids.**

**Jeff’s mind wasn’t on a break, however. He was cranking out the remainder of the story at lightening-speed as well as being analytical, reflective, and down-right convicted.**

**Revisiting all of this was turning out to be very hard on Jeff, emotionally.**

**But for Jason’s sake, he knew it must be said. Jeff was very proud a fourteen-year old would hang in there so well. This was his second day of sharing.**

**“Jason,” Jeff opened up after dinner, “are you ready to continue?”**

**“You bet-cha Pop, let’s go check the fire first.” Jason anxiously replied as he scooted his chair back from the table.**

**“Okay son, let’s go.” And with that he and Jason headed out to the backyard while Maggie headed upstairs to get the girls ready for bed.**

**After father and son had tended the fire, they sat down beside it, Jeff wasted no time in jumping back into the story.**

**“Well, Jason, I’m not going to spend a lot of time on the legal process but go to the heart of it.” Jeff said with a steadfast resolve. “I was convicted of all charges and sentenced to eighteen months in a state penitentiary, as a first-time offender.”**

**“Oh, my-gosh Pop, you were in prison?” Jason interrupted.**

**“Yes son, I’m sorry to say I was,” Jeff reluctantly confirmed and began to fill in even more details.**

**I had been making poor choices for a number of years, but now it was as if I had reached the edge of a steep cliff. This was to be the transition which would accelerate me downward to the lowest point in my life.**

**I had one last night in the Allegheny County Jail, and then I was scheduled to be transferred to the State Correctional Institution – Huntingdon, PA.**

**It was on that same night I had still another dream. As the light began to fade away in this dream, I found myself in Nazareth. I had been living there most of my life, because my dad was one of the Captains of the Roman guard, for the Legion stationed there.**

**It was a rough time keeping the peace for our soldiers and trying to manage the Jewish population, whose customs were so different from ours. One thing which complicated my life to a degree was the fact my best friend was Jewish.**

**His name was Joseph. I also knew his cousin Mary well and was excited to learn the two of them were engaged to be married.**

**One afternoon Joseph saw me walking through town and approached me from the back. He tapped me on the shoulder.**

**“Jeff,” Joseph began as they both greeted each other, “Do you believe in miracles?”**

**“What do you mean?” replied Jeff a little puzzled about the question in the first place.**

**“Well, you know, things you have experienced or know about which you can’t explain.” Joseph continued, “things which shouldn’t really have happened at all.”**

**“At one time in my life, Joseph, I would have said without question, I don’t believe in miracles.” Responded Jeff.**

**“What do you mean?” Joseph came right back at him, “Does that mean you believe in miracles now?”**

**“Let’s say, I’m thinking about them now.” Jeff replied and then questioned, “Why did you bring up the subject anyway?”**

**“I do believe in miracles and wanted to see if you did,” Joseph said with conviction and both friends sat down on a large rock next to a public well. “My people have experienced many miracles in their past and these miracles have been passed down to us as part of our heritage.”**

**“I see,” Jeff said with a little hesitation. “My family talks about Roman conquest and the power of military might. Our people do whatever they wish by the power of our army. Yet, Joseph, you are my best friend and I would trust you with my life.”**

**“Jeff, I feel the same way, but we must let this be our secret.” Joseph concluded.**

**“I know what you’re saying, and for that reason I feel I can share a secret with you,” Jeff opened up. He looked around to see if anyone was close enough to hear him. “I would be in a lot of trouble, if my father ever found out about this. I have been having dreams about your people Joseph, your ancestors.”**

**“What do you mean?” Joseph said with a new focus on their conversation.**

**“You know…your ancestors, David of Bethlehem, Daniel, Noah, and Jonah. I can’t explain it, because you have never shared these stories with me in all of our childhood.”**

**“What?” Joseph broke out with a smile; “I have always felt there was something special about you. You must have a little Jewish blood in you!”**

**“Oh Joseph, what are you talking about?” Jeff replied with a sheepish grin.**

**“Only God could reveal such things to you my brother! These are indeed the makings of the very miracles I was talking about.” Joseph said with great excitement. “I am so happy we ran into each other today.”**

**“Why?” questioned Jeff.**

**“Why?” Joseph went on, “because the reason I wanted to talk with you was to share another miracle. One I experienced last night.”**

**With that comment Joseph took hold of Jeff’s upper arm and directed him off the main street. They walked between two buildings into a more private setting.**

**Then Joseph opened up, “You know I am engaged to Mary. But I was afraid to tell you she is pregnant and not with my child.”**

**“Oh, Joseph,” Jeff interjected.**

**“It is very serious in my faith for a wife to be unfaithful to her husband. I could divorce her or even have her stoned to death.” Joseph was tearing up, “I love Mary and didn’t know what to do. Last night though, I experienced my own miracle.**

**As I slept, I was visited by an angel from God and he told me not to be afraid for the child Mary was carrying was of God and not man. He told me a son would be born and to name him, Jesus. I was to stay faithful to Mary and take her as my wife for she indeed was faithful to me.” 7**

**“Oh, Joseph,” Jeff retorted, “you expect me to believe this?”**

**“My brother, I believe your dreams are true. Why should you not believe my dream?” Joseph replied in a kind and sympathetic voice. “All things are possible with God!”**

**Joseph continued to explain as they began walking through town; “After I awoke from my dream Jeff I was reminded of an old prophesy from Isaiah 7:14 which said: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. Jeff, I never thought in my wildest dreams that I might be the man to raise this special child. What could I ever teach him?”**

**As I was forming a reply to Joseph’s last statement, I was once again over-come by the bright light and woke up in my dismal jail cell.**

**Jason, as I lay there waiting for instructions from the guard, I not only thought about the dream, but the events of the day before me. I was being transferred to prison! I felt depressed and confused.**

**What was going to become of me, and I pondered under my breath: Joseph’s miracles; he truly believes in them. Why can’t I believe in miracles?**

**Look at me, what kind of a future will I have now? If miracles are real, is there any miracle at all left out there… for me?**

**7 Matthew 1 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

# **Ramifications Realized**

**Jason, the dream I had the previous night about Joseph should have provided me with some hope, but I wasn’t feeling any. Instead anxiety began building as I got cleaned up that morning and patiently sat on the edge of my bed. I was fixated on what the coming hours would reveal.**

**I would have been perfectly okay if some-how I could have stopped the clock from advancing. But just as I felt no control over my circumstances the clock simply ticked away with its slow and steady beat. It seemed to sink with my pulse rate.**

**Then without any notice events began to accelerate as the guard arrived and turned the key in the cell lock.**

**“Let’s go Jeff,” the guard plainly directed.**

**As I was being escorted down to breakfast all the activities going on around me seemed amplified. The sights, sounds and smells were all pushing in on me as though I was under attack. I managed to finish my breakfast by focusing solely on the task in front of me. Then the guard returned me to my cell from the dining hall and there I sat for another hour.**

**As I waited, my emotions were getting the better of me and the breakfast I had wasn’t settling down very well in my stomach. The palms of my hands were beginning to get sweaty and I began to wonder again, what this day would actually bring.**

**One thing I did know however, it was going to be a day unlike any I had ever experienced before.**

**I was depressed and my thoughts hovered around Papa, Zechariah, and the confusion I felt about the poor choices of my past.**

**Jason, you know I was determined to succeed in life and not fail; so was this finally failure?**

**Is this what it feels like? It certainly looked like it to me. What is my future going to be like?**

**In contrast to the comforting white light I experienced in my dreams, I seemed to be sliding further into this dark cloud. My hopes were fading, but then for a brief moment and for no explainable reason, a reassuring thought popped into my head. As I adjusted my position a little closer to the edge of my bed, the thought instructed me to hold onto the light. Focus on that which is true.**

**What was that? Where did it come from? Whoa it was like I was on the edge of a cliff and not merely on the edge of my bed at all. I must be struggling to hold on to my sanity… I need help.**

**“Pop that sounds so awful,” Jason responded trying to hold back a tear in his swelling eyes. He felt so bad for his dad.**

**Jason, I was in shock when the guard finally returned and walked me out of my cell. We walked through a number of hallways and as we made one turn after another we were joined by other guards and inmates. I thought to myself, okay here I go.**

**There was a total of seven other men being transferred to the State Correctional Institution, so after we were signed out of the Allegheny County Jail, we were all loaded into a security van.**

**The van had two rows of bench seats, one on each side of the cargo area. There was a metal fence or partition separating the cargo area from the cab. And a thick metal grid covered the floor as an area to trap any rain or snow which might make its way into the vehicle. It was then mid-February; the cold and gloom of the season only added its own imprint on my state of mind.**

**The ride was several hours long to the new facility which was located in central Pennsylvania, and everyone kept quiet and to themselves most of the time. Many of the unsolicited comments came when our van periodically lost a solid contact with the slick road surface. February was living up to its’ reputation.**

**Two of the men had been at Huntingdon before and for a while were angrily spewing out their dislike for the facility and the system which ran it. I didn’t want to hear any of it but had nowhere else to go. My anxiety continued to build.**

**It’s funny how ones’ imagination may get stimulated from a repetitive pattern on a van floor grid. But when there’s nothing else to do, even this becomes entertainment. I had no thoughts of looking up at the other inmates, let alone to contemplate any thought of striking up a conversation.**

**Upon our arrival we were all processed into the state facility and I began facing the reality of my poor choices. Jason, one of the first orders of business after being assigned my cell was to meet the prison counseling staff. From the five counselors available, I was assigned to Bill Gordon.**

**The guard escorted me into Mr. Gordon’s office. His office was about a seven-foot by seven-foot box with bookshelves and filing cabinets on three of the walls and a desk centered on the fourth wall facing the door. Mr. Gordon sat there with his glasses resting over his eyebrows looking through a pile of files stacked on both sides of the desk.**

**There were also two chairs placed in front of his desk for visitors. There was only enough room left in this tiny office for the chairs to be adjusted a few inches in any direction.**

**When Bills’ eyes caught sight of me, his glasses dropped to the end of his nose and his right hand smacked the top of one file lying in the center of his desk. It was mine.**

**“Jeff, I’m Bill and I am here to help you,” he opened up. “Have a seat,” he continued on, pointing haphazardly at both chairs at once.**

**Bill stated in no uncertain terms it would be best for me to listen up, starting right now. “You are here for a reason, correct?”**

**“Yes sir,” I promptly replied as I tried my best to relax in one of the hard-wooden chairs.**

**“Okay, let’s talk about what we are both here for,” Bill continued. “You are here to pay a time penalty for breaking the law. I am here for two reasons. The first one is to counsel you so upon your release you will choose to never return to any correctional institution for the remainder of your life. You understand me on that point?”**

**“Yes sir,” I acknowledged.**

**“Good,” Bill shook his head up and down, and paused to finish a cup of lukewarm coffee.**

**Afterwards he set the cup back down on a piece of letter head paper covered with an array of dried up coffee rings. “I wish I could say my track record was better than it is concerning repeat offenders, but it’s not. And mind you, I’m not saying it’s because I’m doing a poor job, either.”**

**Jeff simply shrugged his shoulders.**

**“Jeff, you have to make a decision that once you’re released, you will consistently make the right choices and not put yourself or others at risk, as you have been doing up to this point in your life.”**

**“Yes sir” I repeated in a flat tone.**

**Bill got a little irritated and responded as his eyebrows came together, “I believe you met a couple of my returning clients during your van ride up here. They apparently have not made the connection yet between choices and ramifications. Do I make myself clear?”**

**“Yes sir, you do,” I was getting this response thing down pretty well now.**

**“Jeff, the second reason I’m here is to help insure everyone inside these walls stays safe,” Bill paused to pour himself a fresh cup of coffee.**

**“What do you mean?” I spoke up, “we are all in our own cells, aren’t we?”**

**“Well, yes, but a prison community is much different than what you are used to outside these walls.”**

**Bill cautioned, “For one thing, none of the inmates want to be here, and as a consequence the guards are under a lot of pressure. Many of the guards are married and have children. They want to return home safely after every shift and we have many rules here to ensure that they and you are not harmed.**

**Most of our staff are good men and work hard, but the pressure of their jobs sometimes may get the better of them. I’m not at liberty to discuss this in any further detail, but just keep it in mind that sometimes good men can turn bad.**

**I must advise you to do your part, by obeying all of our rules. So, with that said, Jeff, do you have any questions for me?” Bill finally concluded.**

**“No sir, I don’t at this moment,” I resolutely ended my reply.**

**“Okay, Jeff, that will be all for today. I will be calling you to my office in a few days to setup a weekly counseling schedule and you will be beginning a Detox program in about two hours. See you in a few days Jeff. Bye!”**

**With that Bill pointed to the door with gusto and I got the clue it was time for me to stand up and leave the room. The awaiting guard walked me back to my cell.**

**Well, Jason, that was my not so exciting welcome to the penal system and my anxiety slowly turned into a boring repetitious daily routine. I say slowly because it wasn’t without some hard knocks along the way.**

**The first three weeks were especially hard. The Detox program was hard enough as it were. And Bill was right about being inside the prison walls. The social structure between guards and inmates was hard for me to accept; not to mention actually interacting with other inmates. Some of the men had uncontrolled tempers while others simply walked around all glassy-eyed and kept to them-selves.**

**I felt so upset the first three weeks that I was unable to eat any breakfast. I never got sick but wasn’t able to eat anything until mid-day.**

**Then slowly my appetite began to return to normal. Managing this new environment was getting a little easier.**

**As the days and weeks continued to past, I could see some truth in what my two van mates were complaining about during our ride to the prison. But I learned things can be a little more palatable if one didn’t rock-the-boat.**

**‘Oh, Pop that sounds crazy,” Jason reacted with disgust. “What was your cell like?”**

**“The jail cells,” Jeff made a contorted facial reply.**

**Oh, Jason I don’t know where to begin talking about them. Well… let me try. To start with, my cell was certainly not up to par with the worst motel I have ever stayed in. It was very cold and stark looking. The concrete block walls were painted in a bland gray color and the contents of the room only consisted of a very basic single bed. It had a rather thin mattress which rested on a squeaky wire mesh. There was also a small bed-side table, toilet, wash bowl, and a tiny shower.**

**There was no privacy. The only clothes we had were the ones we were wearing.**

**My cell had no outside windows or even pictures on the walls. It did have a solid medal door with bars in a two-foot by two-foot window. I felt like I was on exhibit in a zoo of sorts as the guards walked by at regular intervals.**

**The time seemed to pass slowly, and I think this was partially because we, the inmates, were only allowed out of our cells for certain activities during the day. And it certainly wasn’t often enough to my thinking. When we were allowed out, there were common areas for exercise, eating meals, and playing cards or table games.**

**I was scheduled for my regular counseling sessions and successfully went through the detox program. I felt much better then, for not being addicted to drugs and was thankful for that. Phone calls and outside visitors were limited but allowed. My problem was no one really wanted to see me.**

**Well Jason, I should say no one except your mom. Maggie came to see me once every two weeks; it was a long ride for her in each direction. It was then I knew I was falling in love with your mom, but I couldn’t bring myself to say anything to her for obvious reasons. I thought why would she really want to be involved with an eventual X-Con like me?**

**I had survived five months then by mainly keeping to myself. The inmates I had met ranged from those convicted of other nonviolent crimes to those of violent crimes. One important lesson I learned from knowing Rudy was to think twice before befriending anyone.**

**There was plenty of time to reflect on how I got to this point in my life and I still had serious concerns about the future. I felt like I was firmly stuck now, in the dark cloud.**

**One afternoon Bill called me into his office for an unscheduled talk. He shared the news that both my parents had been killed in a car accident with a large semi-truck out in Arizona. I was saddened by the news, but I hadn’t seen them since Papa’s funeral and exchanged very few words even then.**

**The Chaplin came to visit me the next day for a short talk and he gave me a copy of the Bible. I told him I already had one in my cell. He said he was aware of that, but a social worker had found this copy in some unopened mail along with some of my other belongings after I was arrested.**

**I had a number of meetings with the Chaplin over my time in prison but simply had dismissed the message he shared with me. This time was somehow different though, as he shared, I began thinking of Papa and what he tried to share with me before he died.**

**As the Chaplin continued on, I thought for a moment I should let him know about my dreams, but then said nothing. I did, however, continue to listen to the Chaplin with some interest. After our meeting I put the Bible he gave me on the lower shelf of the small table, next to my bed.**

**That evening, I thought more about my parents and regretted not being closer to them. Relationships just hadn’t worked out very well for me. The news of their passing though only added a darker tone to my cloud. This was for sure the lowest point of my life.**

**Because of the Chaplin’s prompting, I also started having more thoughts about those poor souls in my first dream who were doomed for destruction because of the evil things they did. I even thought about the people of Nineveh that Jonah was so upset about.**

**After I had completed ruminating over that sad collection of memories, I thought: Boy, Papa, I sure can relate to those folks.**

**Then for a brief heart-warming moment I felt the big bear-hug Papa had given me so long ago and a still small voice whispered: I Love you Jeff!**

**A tear ran down my cheek. With that I turned towards the gray wall as I laid there quietly in my bed and fell asleep.**

**The light returned as I slept; it was the first time since I came to Huntingdon. However, it wasn’t a new dream, but instead a steady calming light. A voice spoke to me saying:**

***“There is no conflict between man and the rest of my creation, except that which rages in the heart of each man. Jeff, I will bring three last dreams to you. One dream each night for the next three nights; tonight though, just rest in my presence.”***

**The voice ended there, but the soothing light continued until I woke up; I felt unusually rested and strangely at peace. For the first time in several years, I was actually looking forward to going to sleep in the evening. That one feeling amazed me and stuck with me through-out the entire day.**

**What was happening to me? I thought over and over again about the short message I had heard, and I was becoming excited, anticipatory, and yet cautious. Was I experiencing some sort of personal growth or was my sanity finally slipping away in this maze of gray walls?**

**Well, as it turned out, I was still feeling very much at ease as evening came and peacefully fell asleep around ten o’clock. The calming white light appeared again, and the voice started narrating a story for me. This was the beginning of the first of three dreams, as I was told the night before.**

**I noticed at once this dream was much like the very first dream, I had experienced several years ago, in which the voice was an overlay to the scene I was witnessing, but I wasn’t a character in this new dream. A second element I noticed right away was the intensity or should I say the lack of intensity in the voice. Unlike the anger I felt in the first dream, the voice here was soothing.**

**The setting was also one I was familiar with. The diminishing light revealed the small town of Nazareth bustling with a new morning’s activities. The Jewish merchants were already selling their daily goods. Fresh eggs, bread, and milk were quickly selling out as everyone pushed in front of one another in order to prepare for the long days’ work before them. Then as many began to move on, the voice began:**

***“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And everyone went to their own town to register.***

***So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.***

***While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.***

***And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.***

***But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’***

***Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’***

***When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.’***

***So, they hurried off and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.***

***But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.” 8***

**“This is what the angel was talking to Joseph about in the dream Joseph shared with me. Isn’t it?” Jeff questioned.**

***“Yes, it is son but remember to keep it in your forethoughts that this child has a very unique purpose for his life. He was set apart from all others from the very beginning.”* The voice responded to Jeff as he then continued with the story.**

***“On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.***

***When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons.***

***Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.***

***When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my* *eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.’***

***The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: ‘This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.’***

***There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.***

***When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.***

***Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. After the festival was over, his parents began their journey home, but the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph were unaware of this.***

***Thinking Jesus was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.***

***After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.***

***When Jesus parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him: ‘Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.’***

***‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.***

***Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” 8***

**“Jason,” Jeff declared with resolve as he finished recalling the dream, “I was amazed! Joseph was right and his son had grown to be a remarkable young man.”**

**Jason replied, “Pop, I remember hearing parts of this story in Sunday school, but I could never remember all of the details you just shared.”**

**“I know Jason.” Jeff acknowledged, “somehow every word has become a permanent part of my memory. The same dreams I used to be so fearful of, now bring me peace. Well, I’ll talk about this more a little later. Jason, the second day’s activities after that dream turned out to be a blur for me. I can’t remember a single thing I did.”**

**Jeff laughed nervously as though he had just had his first senior moment.**

**Jason, I was concentrating so hard on replaying the first night’s dream over in my head. There was a lot happening in the dream and although I recalled the story fully, I knew there was still something about its meaning which was beyond my ability to understand then.**

**I also wondered what would happen in the next dream, which was only about four hours or so away, as the second evening was quickly drawing to a close. The mere fact I felt peaceful was still puzzling me, but I was enjoying every moment.**

**Jason, something was happening to me, but I couldn’t put my finger on it just yet.**

**8 Luke 2 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

# **My Time Has Come!**

**Confusion seemed to dominate my general thought process. Jason, in review of all the dreams I had experienced I needed to give some consideration to the reality of God. Even King Nebuchadnezzar in his dream had recognized the power and wisdom of God, even though the king only witnessed it through the life of Daniel.**

**Daniel had made a reference to a kingdom which would have no end. That is certainly not any kingdom I was told about in public school. Papa was trying his best to share with me, but I certainly wasn’t receptive. However, I had finally come to the realization it was God who was trying to communicate with me, even though I hadn’t a clue as to why.**

**With one of the last three dreams now in my memory bank, I felt like something has got to start making some sense to me. I knew I had made a complete mess of my life. Somehow, something good has to come from all of this.**

**“Wouldn’t you think so Jason?” Jeff questioned to check if Jason’s thoughts were still connecting with his.**

**Jason simply smiled with a little shrug of his shoulders. Jeff smiled back at his son.**

**I was still feeling a general sense of peace throughout the day which followed the first dream. But never-the-less Jeff became all keyed up by late evening, and simply had a hard time winding down.**

**The night hours dwindled away as if they were sand in an hourglass, but there was no need to turn the glass upside-down. The sand simply continued to pore through. This feeling was starting to get on my nerves.**

**My thoughts flashed through the last three years of my life. I regretted the poor choices, the missed opportunities, family members I had lost, and wondered like Jonah, in my dream about him, if life could even be restored.**

**Through some of these dreams, I was also reminded about how David had served, Daniel was steadfast, and Joseph believed in miracles. I wanted to believe in miracles, in the worst way, but how does one do that?**

**My thoughts bounced all over the place for hours. With all of my dreams available for instant recall, my mind kept spinning. It was about 2:00 A.M. before my eyes finally closed. But when they did, the light came right back.**

***“I wasn’t so sure you would even sleep tonight, but I am happy to be with you now. You know I could visit with you during the day as well and I hope to in the days to come, but until then this dream will do just fine.***

***Jeff, I have been listening to you and I must say: It’s not all that hard to believe in miracles. It simply takes… faith. You’ll see.***

***Well, the scene you will be watching tonight is in an area of the country you haven’t been to before. However, it’s not too far from an area you have spent many happy hours with your young friends in the past. I think you might say, just over the next hill.”***

**“Yes sir, I guess I might say that,” Jeff responded out of respect.**

**As the voice continued on, the light had already begun to fade and a country scene unfolded before my eyes.**

**There were a variety of palm trees, olive trees, and bushes spread across a vast landscape of rolling grassland with a sand-bar adjacent to a slow running creek. One could hear the water falling over the rocks and smell the grass as these sensations all mixed together in a warm breeze. The sun was shining brightly on a beautiful Autumn afternoon.**

**Jesus was walking in one direction with twelve of his followers, while a large crowd of people were disbursing in the opposite direction, a few hundred yards behind them.**

***“You see, Jeff, by now Joseph’s son, Jesus, has started his work and he had many people following him as he travels by foot through the country-side.***

***On this day when Jesus was walking and praying with his disciples, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?”***

***They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others that you are one of the prophets of long ago which has come back to life.’***

***But what about you? he asked. Who do you say I am?***

***Peter, one of his followers, answered, ‘God’s Messiah.’***

***Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.***

***Then he said to them all: Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.***

***What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.***

***Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.***

***About eight days after…” 9***

**“Wait a moment here.” Jeff shyly interjected, “You are talking about dying and then living again. I don’t understand! What difference does it make if we lose our life one way or another? Dead is dead, isn’t it?”**

***“Be patient Jeff, you will be more grounded to understand these things after I have completed sharing with you. Hold on to your questions a little bit longer, okay?”***

**“Okay,” Jeff acknowledged though still confused.**

***“So about eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning. Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem.***

***Peter and his companions were very sleepy, but when they became fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. As the men were leaving Jesus, Peter said to him, ‘Master, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.’***

***While Peter was speaking, a cloud appeared and covered them, and they were afraid as they entered the cloud. A voice came from the cloud, saying, this is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him. When the voice had spoken, they found that Jesus was alone. The disciples kept this to themselves and did not tell anyone at that time what they had seen.” 9***

**A loud rackety metallic sound filled the air.**

**“Hey! Wake up in there. You should be ready for breakfast by now!” The guard snorted as he began banging on the bars with his clipboard one more time.**

**“Okay I’m ready, I’m ready! Hold your horses.”**

**Jeff nervously replied as he scrambled to get himself ready. He quickly pulled his trousers up, buttoned his shirt, and combed his hair the best he could without the aid of a mirror.**

**This was now the beginning of the third day. Jason, I happened to have a busy schedule ahead of me. Immediately after breakfast I was scheduled for a lengthy exercise program.**

**Time ran short after the workout so I asked the guard if he would take me back to my cell; I wanted to get cleaned up before my counseling session. As I turned quickly to the left, I ran right into a guy who was walking down the hall. As a result, books and papers went flying. Both of us began picking up the mess.**

**“I’m so sorry I didn’t mean…” Jeff began to apologize, “Oh Chaplin, its’ you.”**

**“It’s okay Jeff. I’m afraid I wasn’t really looking where I was going either,” the Chaplin replied.**

**“Sir I’ve been thinking about sharing some stuff with you,” Jeff matter-of-factly opened up as he was still quickly picking up the spillage.**

**The Chaplin smiled, “Oh, and what might that be?”**

**Jeff hesitated, “Well I haven’t been reading the Bible, exactly, but I have been having dreams about some of the Bible characters.”**

**“Well that’s very interesting Jeff,” the Chaplin replied. “Maybe God is trying to get your attention.”**

**Jeff took a step back, “Sir, that’s what… someone else once told me.”**

**“Why don’t you stop by my office when you’re able and we’ll talk about it,” the Chaplin kindly offered, “Okay Jeff?”**

**“Okay, I will.” Jeff smiled as he handed the Chaplin all the stuff he had picked up.**

**Then he took off down the hallway trying to catch up with the guard. Their walk took them by the laundry room and Jeff made sure he picked up a clean set of clothes.**

**Jason, once back in my cell, I hurried to clean up as quickly as possible and went to two counseling sessions, lunch, and an afternoon program which everyone was requested to attend.**

**Before I knew it, dinner time had passed, and it was already evening. The third day was ending; what was this last dream going to be about?**

**Well, I sat on the edge of my bed and thought to myself: I’ll find out soon enough.**

**Even-though I had only a little time to reflect on the second dream, I was taken back by the part which reported Joseph’s son was going to die.**

**This was a very disturbing dream for me. Why should a good young man like him have to die a horrible death?**

**As the voice in last night’s dream had suggested (or maybe that was actually God), I was certainly going to stockpile my questions concerning this dream and had already put one or two questions neatly on the side to get the pile started.**

**However, it was getting late and I was worn-out by the day’s activities. I simply rolled onto my side, still fully dressed. As my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep.**

**After I had spent only a little while in the soothing light, the voice returned.**

***“Jeff, I know you have been enjoying my calming presence. Whether you have been consciously aware of it or not, it has been by your choice. That is a gift given to all.***

***Tonight, I plan on sharing with you why Jesus did what he did.***

***Jeff, it was because I wish to have a personal relationship with you and all who will hear my voice and come to me. The bad things you have done, your sin, keeps you from knowing me. Jesus came so that we may be reconnected and have the relationship I have always intended to have with you.***

***He was finally the one spoken of in all Jewish history who was the sacrificial human lamb. No animal sacrifice could do what Jesus was sent to accomplish.***

***As the result of His great love, my Spirit becomes part of you when you choose to believe in me, simply by faith, because I am Spirit and may not be seen by human eyes. Having my Spirit inside you will allow us to communicate anytime we wish.***

***This will be your last dream and it will reveal some of the nature of my Spirit.***

***Afterwards the choice will be yours as to whether or not we will continue our relationship.***

***The following words you will be listening to are spoken by the one named Paul.***

***We speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.***

***None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.***

***However, as it is written: ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ — the things God has prepared for those who love him— these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.***

***The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.***

***What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.***

***This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.***

***The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.***

***The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ. 10***

***And Jesus said: ‘I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’ 11***

***Paul had finished and the voice then returned; Remember, Jeff, how I revealed, through Daniel, the truth to King Nebuchadnezzar about the dream he had and the meaning of his dream?***

***Remember what I did through David when he faced the giant, Goliath?***

***All things are possible through me!”***

**The dream ended, but the soothing light continued until I was awoken by the guard turning on my cell light.**

**I turned away from the gray wall and reached down to locate the Bible I placed on the lower shelf of my nightstand.**

**I opened the cover to reveal an unexpected inscription (Oh, what’s this? I questioned as a warm peace came over me.):**

***To Jeff my beloved Grandson,***

***I love you so much, but there is still another who loves you more. Just turn to the next page and you will meet the One who is Truth!***

***With all my love… Papa***

**Well, just seeing what Papa wrote brought tears to my eyes. I did as Papa had suggested and read in the Bible for quite a while. Then along with the contents of last night’s dream freshly in my mind, my eyes and heart were opened, and I declared:**

**You… God! You are Truth…, and you have been drawing me closer through all these dreams! I am a sinner (I know that for sure) and I remember Jonah saying you were with him no matter where he may be. I can feel you here… now!**

**My life has felt just like a pile of old bones. You know the ones; those two men at my table at the Market Square in my first dream.**

**But now, I feel… alive. I can’t explain it.**

**Papa was right. Truth is found through a unique person; not a random thought or a social movement. I do believe Jesus died and was brought back to life so I may also have a personal relationship with you.**

**I have finally found Truth and understand why I am here in this dismal place.**

**Thank you, God, for not giving up on me!**

**9 Luke 9 NIV translation**

**10 1 Corinthians 2 NIV translation**

**11 1 John 14:6 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

# **Out of My Control**

**Jason, I can’t explain in words what fully happened to me the morning I turned my life over to God, but I did feel like a different person. After breakfast I went to visit the Chaplin and shared as much of my history with him as time would allow. He was very gracious and kind.**

**After we prayed together, he assured me the Faith I had found was real, but there still would be challenges. The difference now was I had the strength to face them, as long as I continued to tap into the source of my new Faith.**

**One by one all the dreams I experienced had an understandable meaning for me. As I revisited each one of them, I saw how God was teaching me something new, and my current thought process had a clarity I had never known before.**

**Ten days went by and Maggie was scheduled for a visit with me at 2:00 P.M. She arrived right on time and the guard escorted me into one of the visitor’s rooms. I picked up the phone and greeted Maggie, who was sitting on the other side of the glass partition as she had been for these many months.**

**“You look a little different today.” Maggie declared with a questioning grin.**

**“I do?” Jeff replied with his own nervous little grin.**

**“Yeah… What’s up?” Maggie questioned.**

**“I didn’t think you would notice anything.” Jeff began, “I found Truth; I found God!”**

**“That’s wonderful Jeff, I’ve been praying for you.” Maggie returned with a comforting sigh.**

**Jeff’s heart began to pump a little harder, “I know you have been. Maggie, did you also know I love you?”**

**“I’ve been waiting a long time to hear those words too, young man!” Maggie dropped a tear or two.**

**“I’m sorry Maggie, but before I thought there was no way you would want to have anything to do with a guy like me,” Jeff confessed.**

**“In some ways you’re right Jeff.” Maggie smiled, “but with what you have just shared with me, everything is brand new. Nothing is impossible! You know?”**

**“I know Maggie! I have realized more than one miracle in my life, in less than two weeks.” Jeff was beginning to tear up as well.**

**Jeff and Maggie had a long and heart felt talk that day. It only ended after the guard reminded them twice that the time for visiting had finished fifteen minutes ago.**

**Jeff questioned the guard, “Are you sure our time is up?”**

**“Sorry Jeff, I’m sure”, the guard respectfully replied through the window of the visitor’s door behind him. “I’ll be back to get you in two minutes.” Jeff then heard the guard stop at the next visitor’s room, “Okay Carl, let’s go.” This was followed by two sets of footsteps moving down the hall.**

**So, Jason your Mom and I said our final goodbyes for the visit and Maggie began to make her way out of the complex to her car for the long ride home. I got up from my chair and patiently stood at another door to wait for the familiar sound of the key turning in the lock, so the guard could escort me back to my cell. Sure-enough just like clockwork I heard the key enter the lock and click to the left.**

**That evening after dinner I sat on the edge of my bed with a big smile on my face. Did that conversation with Maggie really happen? I was filled with a joy and a hope I had no memory of, ever.**

**Thank you, God, I never thought Maggie would respond so lovingly. It was as though she never knew anything about my past; there was only love and hope in her eyes.**

**I sat there for almost two hours just imagining being with Maggie after I got out of prison. Maggie is such a fun-loving woman. She likes going places, being with people, and I knew with her big heart she was hoping we would one day start growing a family of our own.**

**Jeff was feeling emotions he never thought would come to him. Among these feelings he felt renewed, which was a place he had never been before. God is so good.**

**It was about 11:00 P.M. and the lights had been out for an hour, so Jeff undressed down to his tee-shirt and shorts, and slid comfortably under his blanket. After giving thanks to God for the wonderful day, he closed his eyes and peacefully fell asleep.**

**There were no dreams that night, but the reality about to unfold would prove to be extremely unnerving. About 5:00 A.M. someone crawled over the top of him and wedge between him and the gray wall. The springs under the mattress were squeaking wildly and Jeff’s eyes flew open and his heart began to pound.**

**What’s happening? The room was dark with a little light coming in from the hallway through the bars. There were no additional sounds and the cell door was still closed.**

**The situation seemed calm at the moment, so Jeff slowly lifted his blanket and rolled out of the bed. In the dim light Jeff recognized the intruder as one of the night guards, Steve. Steve’s face was full of anxiety and fear.**

**Jeff thought to himself, “God, what am I to do? What am I to say?”**

**Then without any further hesitation the words came out. “Steve… Steve can I help you?” Jeff calmly began. There was no response.**

**“Steve, I can see the pain on your face and in your eyes. Is there anything I can do to help you? I know what it’s like to be in pain.”**

**Steve just laid there unable to speak, so Jeff decided he would take a risk and continue. “Steve, I’m not going to hurt you, but I’m going to step up to the bed and cover you up, okay?”**

**Jeff moved slowly and calmly up to the edge of the bed and tossed the blanket over Steve. Steve made no attempt to retaliate, but simply stared in Jeff’s general direction.**

**“Steve, you look like you’re hurting pretty bad. I want you to know God loves you very much and it doesn’t matter to him what you may have done in the past.” Jeff took a big breath and continued in the prevailing silence, “Steve, if you let God into your heart right now, he not only can, but will take away all the hurt you’re feeling.”**

**Steve moved his eyes at that very moment and focused them straight on Jeff. Jeff pushed forward, “Steve, we’re all messed up, look at me. I live in this cell. But I have learned how to get out of the dark cloud I was living in, and you can too.**

**I learned God sent his son, Jesus, to live among us and He alone paid the price for all of our wrongdoing, our sin, so that we may be part of His family. We will have a personal relationship with God, and He will love us always.”**

**Jeff sensed Steve’s facial expression had relaxed somewhat, so he slowly moved to the edge of the bed and sat down facing towards the door. Steve sat up and began to cry. He totally took Jeff by surprise and wrapped his arms around Jeff, sobbing uncontrollably on Jeff’s shoulder.**

**Steve wept for about fifteen minutes and between all the tears he periodically repeated the words “I’m sorry…I’m sorry” over and over again.**

**During this time, compassion replaced Jeff’s fear and Jeff slowly raised his limp arms and gave Steve a proper hug back. After Steve had finally worked through his crying, Jeff asked, “You better…are you feeling any better now?”**

**Steve simply nodded in agreement.**

**Jeff sighed and resolutely proclaimed, “Steve, I’m going to call for a guard now. Is that okay with you?”**

**Steve nodded again.**

**Jeff stood up and walked to the door. It was then he noticed a string tied to the far-right window bar and there was a cell key hanging at the end of the string. Steve’s clothes lay in disarray on the hall floor. Jeff thought to himself, Steve’s got an escape plan and Jeff assumed this wasn’t the first time for Steve’s behavior. He knew then God was watching over him.**

**Jeff mustered up as much volume as he could in the prevailing silence and called for any guard who might be within ear shot.**

**Jason, soon two guards arrived, and I told them what had happened. The guards took Steve out of my cell, wrapped up in the blanket, as Steve began to cry once more.**

**As they stepped into the hallway Steve turned his head to me one last time and said sorrowfully, “I am sorry.” Then they all disappeared around the corner.**

**I sat on the edge of my bed thanking God for his help, but there was no way I was getting any more sleep that morning.**

**Even as I was headed to breakfast the news of last night’s ordeal had spread everywhere. All eyes were staring at me, but I tried to keep my composure the best I could. A few of the men (just a few) even gave me a reassuring pat on my back as I passed them by.**

**By 10:00 A.M. I was called into a meeting with my counselor and the Chaplin. Bill wanted to hear from me what had happened, and I told him the story.**

**“I see,” Bill stated after I had finished sharing. He then gave me a frank response, even as he was throwing a side-ways glance towards the Chaplin, “Jeff, I’m sure you remember the description of prison life I gave you soon after your arrival.” (Bill is really good at frank statements.) “Well I must admit there have been a few issues the Warden has been trying to resolve.”**

**“What are you saying?” Jeff retaliated. “Does the Warden know about Steve’s behavior?”**

**“No Jeff… not exactly,” Bill corrected himself. “Just like any other community, we can’t accuse anyone of a crime without any evidence or a witness. I want to thank you for reporting the incident to the guards on duty. That took some real courage. Because Steve is an employee, he has already been placed on an administrative leave and there will be a formal hearing.”**

**“I see,” Jeff mumbled.**

**“Jeff, it will be your decision, however the outcome of the hearing will strongly hinge on whether you decide to testify or not,” Bill explained. “You don’t have to give me your reply at this point in time.”**

**“I understand,” Jeff replied.**

**Bill continued to explain, “I talked with Steve briefly and because I’m not going to be one of the people on his hearing board, I can go off the record with you for a moment.”**

**“You’re not going to be on the board?” Jeff questioned.**

**“No Jeff,” Bill confirmed. “It wouldn’t be allowed or right, because you are my client. Steve will go through a complete psychiatric evaluation however between the Chaplin, you and I, I believe Steve seems to be suffering from a degree of schizophrenia and depression. You just happened to be an unexpected victim.”**

**“I’m in no position to judge him,” Jeff spoke up, “but he has always struck me as being a little odd.”**

**“Jeff, when you first arrived here, I could tell you were a person who simply reacted to the situations around you.” Bill just opened up and spilled out his feelings, “By defensively reacting, you didn’t give yourself any time to think things over; you simply jumped ahead. Those types of defensive behavior helped to put you right here.**

**However, now I can see something has changed. Last night, instead of reacting, you responded to the situation you found yourself in. You offensively took charge of the moment and responded wisely. Jeff, you made some good choices.”**

**The Chaplin motioned to Bill and they both moved to the corner of the office for a private talk. Well, in Bill’s office, that meant they stood up, turned their backs to me, and whispered to each other between the bookshelf and the filing-cabinet.**

**After a brief collaboration the Chaplin turned to me. He commended me for handling the situation so wisely. Then Bill also assured me Steve had told him the same story I had given, and Steve was very remorseful for his actions.**

**I was relieved at hearing their findings. It clearly sent the message Steve wouldn’t be throwing any unfounded accusations in my direction. Then I was taken by surprise at the Chaplin’s next question.**

**“Jeff, if you are willing…” the Chaplin began, “would you be willing to work as my assistant? I could use help with both my small and larger group meetings.”**

**“You want me? You must be kidding.” I said in disbelief. “I’m so new and I don’t know very much of the Bible, yet.”**

**“Yes, I’m sure Jeff,” the Chaplin said with assurance. “It’s not just about what we know in our heads, but also what we live out through our hearts. You would be a great help to me, and I will help you whenever the need arises.”**

**Jeff humbly replied, “I don’t know what to say; I would be honored.”**

**So, with this newfound strength and direction in Jeff’s life, he completed the remaining time of his prison sentence and was released. With God and Maggie, the time flew by as he focused on not just one, but two brand new relationships in his life.**

**On the day of Jeff’s release, Maggie was waiting outside the prison gate and gave Jeff a huge bear hug and a kiss when he walked through the gate.**

**“Jeff, I am so proud of you.” Maggie smiled and then gave Jeff another hug. She whispered in his ear, “I’ve missed you so much.”**

**Jeff hugged Maggie back, “I love you. Today is the first day of our future together; it feels like my life has been restored even beyond my expectations. Will you pinch me, so I know this isn’t a dream?”**

**“There… how does that feel?” Maggie smiled after expelling as much strength as she dared.**

**“Wonderful!” Jeff winced with joy.**

**As they were walking to the car, Steve approached Jeff and shook his hand.**

**Without any hesitation he began his greeting, “Jeff, thank you for the honesty and the kindness you showed me. I didn’t deserve it. And thank you for standing up for me at my hearing. As a result, I have only four more months of probation and counseling, then I will be allowed to return to my job.”**

**“Steve, I’m happy it worked out for you.” Jeff kindly replied. “The Chaplin told me you have been attending a church near your home.”**

**“I have,” Steve smiled. “Thank you for sharing your faith with me.”**

**“You’re welcome.” Jeff concluded as he and Maggie got into her car.**

**Jeff was elated as they drove off. Despite the reality he was now an X-con, Jeff was feeling a whole array of exciting emotions as he watched the prison fade away in the passenger’s side-view mirror. The prison represented for Jeff, what was left of his dark cloud.**

**He thought about Jonah one more time, and then broke out in an even bigger smile as he recaptured the thought; it is possible for life to be restored.**

**Jeff looked over at Maggie with an uninhibited grin and squeezed her hand. Jeff was happier than he could ever remember.**

**Well, as each day passed Jeff held on to the thought that this is indeed another new day and a new opportunity for him. He focused on the light instead of the darkness and tried his best to make good choices.**

**After Jeff got set up in a new apartment, he enrolled in a two-year degree program at CCAC (Community College of Allegheny County) and majored in Computer Science. While that was all unfolding, he and Maggie were also planning for their wedding.**

**Maggie’s parents had made a 180-degree turn in their opinions about Jeff after they got to know him and grew to love him as a son.**

**Life wasn’t perfect; how can it be? But together, Jeff and Maggie were able to work through the daily challenges. Among the high-lights were their marriage, a fixer-upper house they bought about two miles from her parent’s home, a young son and more recently, a set of adorable twin daughters.**

**Jeff thought for a few silent moments whether he had left anything of importance out of his story and concluded – he had not.**

**“Well Jason that’s my story.” Jeff declared with a sigh of satisfaction and relief. “What do you think son?”**

**“That was really great Pop,” Jason excitedly responded! “Listen, I’m going to run over to Vince’s house for a few minutes, okay?”**

**“Wait now, it’s late. You can see Vince in the morning. He’s probably asleep by this hour.”**

**“No Pop, I see the light on in his room. I’ll be right back!” Jason shouted as he began running towards the front yard.**

**“Honey,” Maggie questioned as she approached the smoldering campfire, “Where’s Jason off to?”**

**“He went over to talk with Vince for a moment.”**

**“How did the talk go with Jason?” Maggie inquired.**

**“You know, I think he understands,” Jeff began as he turned the garden hose on the remaining embers. “There was a look in his eyes. Maggie, it reminded me of the looks Papa used to give me. Yes, I think he got the message.”**

**“Good.” Maggie replied with a smile as they began walking arm-in-arm back to the house. “Let’s go in. We have a little coffee left. Would you like some?”**

**“Yeah” Jeff said peacefully, “I’ll go upstairs first and kiss the girls good-night.”**

**“Okay” Maggie replied as she reached in the kitchen cabinet for a clean coffee cup.**

**“…Good evening, this is Katrina Pennington of KDKB. Welcome to our eleven o’clock late-night news hour. We open up this evening’s broadcast with a late breaking story from the quiet Township of Dormont in the South Hills.**

**The residents there are reeling from the sudden and tragic death of a fourteen-year old boy who was struck by a car while he was crossing the street. Witnesses reported the driver appeared to be DUI and driving well over the speed limit.**

**Authorities are not releasing the name of the victim due to the ongoing investigation. Our prayers go out to the family for their great loss; and we hope to have an update for you in our morning report…”**

***Jeff… I know how much you are hurting. I lost my Son, as well. I waited for you to go to sleep although it took much longer than I expected. I am with you and I am here to comfort you.***

***There won’t be any dreams tonight; however, I want you to rest in my calming presence. You will see a soothing warm light to focus on, and I want to tell you how much I love you.***

***You will miss Jason for the remainder of your days on earth, but he isn’t lost.***

***Jeff… Jason did hear you around the campfire and as a result he did believe in me.***

***That’s why he wanted to run over to Vince’s house. Jason wanted to share your story… my story, with him.***

***Right now, I have Jason wrapped up in my arms; and he and his great-grandfather (Papa) are having a wonderful conversation about you. They are sharing their anticipation about you, Maggie, your daughters and all your loved ones being back together in my presence.***

***Ever since sin entered the world, man has done a wonderful job of complicating life and distorting the whole reason for mans’ existence. Man is here mainly so individuals like you may have a personal relationship with me.***

***You learned during a very low point in your life, my gift to you is free by my Grace and the only way by which you and I can know each other. Our relationship is new every morning and is indeed to be lived… one day at a time.***

***And you know, Jeff, it doesn’t matter if someone knows me early on in their life or if they are even older than your Papa was, everyone receives the same gift and the same reward. It is a never-ending relationship with me.***

***Jeff don’t stop telling your story! You came to me through it, and now Jason is with me. Your story came out of adversity, but so do most stories for those who live on this earth. What everyone needs to know is the true way to break out of the adversity and the lies they have lived with for so long.***

***Your troubles no longer determine your fate. Help as many as you can, with the time I have given you.***

***Oh, and don’t be worried about Maggie. I am also with her this night. She too has my comforting presence.***

***Knowing me would be of no value if I hadn’t given each person the ability to choose for themselves. My Son made His choices also and was willing to be nailed to a cross for the decisions he made.***

***And yes, that is why crazy old Papa did what he did in his hospital room. The nail was a reminder of not only how your Papa spent his life, but how my Son spent his life for all.***

***Without a conscious realization, you have indeed learned the secrets of Papa’s leaf and the nail. Jeff, you have been living this reality ever since we began our relationship that lonely morning in your prison cell.***

***Your Papa was right when he asked you not to look for “what” is truth, but “who” is Truth. I am the Truth you had been seeking. I will continue to love you and Maggie, always.***

***I won’t show you any more visions or dreams, because I promised you I wouldn’t. But I am going to leave you with a basic truth; one which will never fail you and will always remain to guide you. The words you will be hearing were spoken by the one I named Paul.***

***“‘If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.***

***If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.***

***If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.***

***Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.***

***Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. Love never fails.***

***But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.***

***When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, and I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.***

***For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.***

***And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” 12***

**12 1 Corinthians 13 NIV translation**

# **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

# **In His Timing**

**Jason’s part in this story has come to an end, but the rest of us are all still here. We moved on the best we could, but there hasn’t been a single day I don’t think about my best friend.**

**That night, I heard the sounds of the accident from my bedroom. I was laying on my bed and heard his muffled voice from across the street: ‘Vince… Vince, you still awake?’ Jason was running through his front yard. And then I heard tires squealing, a thud noise, and two late night walkers screaming franticly. My thoughts went ballistic.**

**By the time I ran downstairs and into my front yard, Mr. & Mrs. McGivney were already on the ground with Jason in their arms. My mom and dad were knelt beside them and all four of them were praying.**

**In the distance, I could already hear the faint sound of an ambulance coming as quickly as it could. A late-night thunderstorm was also moving in as lightening flashed to the west, followed by a muffled roll of thunder. I stood there next to Jason as mounting gusts of wind began to intensify; tears were blurring my vision.**

**Jason was motionless, but conscious. He was in a state of shock, but still pushed himself to speak.**

**With his eyes fixed on his dad, Jason seemed to expel all the energy he had left, “Thank you for sharing your story with me. Pop, I understand…” Jason let out a garbled cough, “Tell Vince for me… I can see the white light coming over me now…Mom…Pop…I love you!”**

**And with those last three words Jason took his last breath.**

**We all hugged and cried our eyes out as the ambulance pulled to a stop. Two police vehicles pulled up right behind the ambulance. It began to rain. The paramedics tried their best to revive Jason. But his body was too broken; somehow, we knew and weren’t surprised as the paramedics completed their rescue attempt. A blanket was raised to cover up Jason’s face as the police officers then felt comfortable enough to approach us for questioning.**

**I looked on as everyone was questioned and my emotions were torn apart.**

**Jason had appeared to be at peace in his last moments; his last thoughts were all about others, not himself.**

**I just stood there; after all, where could I go? I was exactly where I wanted to be, beside Jason.**

**The light rain only lasted about ten minutes and the peels of thunder were now to our east, but we paid no attention to them anyway.**

**My difficulties began after the scene was cleared. I didn’t move from where I was, like I didn’t know what to do next. I was in my front yard, yet I felt lost.**

**Then I felt my dad put his arm around me and I slowly looked up at his face. We turned to go back into our house.**

**“Come on, Vince, it’s time to go in,” my dad comforted me with a big bear-hug.**

**Then we continued to walk inside and as we passed through our front door, I turned my head to take one last look at the spot where Jason died.**

**Jason’s memorial service was filled with many loving and joyous memories, as well as more tears. Our baseball team and the coaches sat with us in the front row. It looked as though all of Dormont and many from the general Pittsburgh area were in attendance to support the family.**

**It only took the police a short while in their investigation to locate the driver of the car who hit Jason. Even though it was dark that night, the witnesses were able to give a good description of the vehicle.**

**The trial, however, didn’t come for another ten months and the suspect pleaded not guilty because she thought she had hit a deer. The Prosecution did a good job of presenting the evidence. The eye-witnesses and the damage on the front of the vehicle were very helpful, but the conclusive evidence came from a surprising source.**

**The overwhelming evidence came from Papa’s nail. Jason must have taken the plastic bag out of his pocket as he was running over to my house.**

**Upon the impact of the accident, the nail was somehow lodged into the front grill of the car. And that’s exactly where the investigators found it when the car was impounded. The nail was still partially in the plastic bag and after analysis Papa’s blood was found all over it. Along with Jeff’s testimony as to how the nail came into Jason’s possession, the court’s course of action was clear.**

**The suspect was rightfully found guilty of involuntary manslaughter.**

**It won’t bring Jason back, but maybe it might just save another life. And for me, I was amazed at how God had so creatively provided the evidence needed to clearly confirm the truth of what happened. We also were able to continue our healing process after the trial was completed, but closure; well, I know there will always be a scar.**

**Time has passed by too quickly. As you may recall, I was eighteen when I started documenting the core of Jason’s story for you. It was Mr. McGivney who filled me in on most of the details of that last weekend. I wanted to know everything that happened before Jason passed away. I still miss him greatly.**

**So as time continues to run its’ course, so all of us have moved on. I graduated from Penn State, entered the work force, and married a wonderful woman, Christie. I’m now forty-three years old.**

**This body of mine is definitely not young anymore, but my mind is sharper than ever. At least that’s my opinion. My wife and I have three boys and one girl. And yes, after we named our first boy Sam, after my dad, our second son is named Jason.**

**The McGivney’s are still living in the same house and we get together with them about two or three times a year. And it’s Mr. … Jeff who continues to share their family story with as many people who will listen to him.**

**Jason’s life has helped me to realize:**

**“Even though everyone is totally unique, our fundamental need is uniquely the same.”**

**Questions and answers; life is certainly full of them. Isn’t it? We all have questions. But rest assured they all do have an answer, even though we will need to be patient.**

**Life its’-self is a big question for many people… many of us take it for granted. Now don’t we? I know I certainly did.**

**Come on, be honest with me. When was the last time you have had a thought similar to this?**

**“We only have a limited amount of time in this life; yet too often we spend it as though it’s an unlimited resource.”**

**Well, come on now… have you had a thought like this? If not, it may be time to explore its’ content.**

**For me, time has become a very precious commodity and I feel none of it should ever be wasted. This one opportunity is before me, so I try to use my time wisely.**

**Hindsight is a good teacher; we would all do well to listen to her. Time wisely spent today, will produce a bountiful return tomorrow.**

**Throughout history men and women have sought to live and provide the best life experience possible for themselves and their families. There have been many successes and many failures over the years. Some of the failures were definitely out of mans’ control, such as those spun by the ravages of war and famine.**

**However, many of the outcomes are the results of personal choices. Not some, but all choices have ramifications. Some will have positive results and welcomed with open arms, and others will not be welcomed at all. Even though it would be beneficial to see into the future, this isn’t an option for mankind.**

**Jeff found this out the hard way but find it he did. He learned or maybe I should say realized while he was in prison that he had moved out of his dark cloud and into the light. In the days to follow Jeff experienced a new reality, which I also found referenced in the New Testament.**

***“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”*  1 John 1:7**

**Because Jeff shared with me after Jason’s death, my life has been better for it. Can you tell I still talk like a Sociologist?**

**After I graduated from college, I went on to obtain a counseling license, and became a counselor. I still work full time at the Allegheny County Jail.**

**Who knows how much time I may have left? So, I’m not going to throw you any legal punches, but clearly state what I feel is missing from many individuals in our society… God is missing!**

**I believe God is the answer to all of the questions in life that should really matter.**

**In the book of Genesis (1:7), we are told God created Adam out of dust and breathed into him the breath of life. That’s it for me, short and sweet; oh, we could stir up a decades-long debate in an attempt to expand this short statement into volumes of tumultuous dialog, but then man has already done that. Haven’t we?**

**This one topic has torn apart families, brother against brother, long before the word ‘evolution’ was ever coined. I have already revealed which side of this coin I’m on, but it makes no difference what anyone else thinks about your relationship with God; it’s none of their business. It’s solely between you and God alone.**

**How can society go on thinking truth is able to change as easily as the wind changes direction, or as an individual’s thought pattern waves to and fro?**

**We humans are wonderful at getting into all sorts of awkward and dangerous situations. Some are the result of poor choices, but some are totally out of our control. I don’t wish to overstate a much-used quote however at times we are simply “in the wrong place at the wrong time.”**

**And believing in God, as I do, God has a choice He needs to make in these times. In His timing, God would either choose to let the event run its’ course as it would in the human arena; or He may say something like: “I see what is happening here, however I have something else I would like you to do.”**

**As a result, God may intervene in a situation and sustain a life for His own purposes and alter that which would naturally occur in the course of human events. The result for us is that we see and hear about some miraculous events of survival we simply can’t understand.**

**The real conflict isn’t about how many millions of years old a rock may or may not be.**

**The reality for each man and woman should be a deep concern as to where their own soul is to spend millions of years (eternity).**

**The Bible records truth, with all of its complexity, to ground us for the life we will experience here and for the reality of the unseen reward our spirit’s will receive, being with Him forever.**

**In Psalm 139: 13-15 it is recorded: “For you (God) created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful; I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.”**

**And then in the book of John, chapter 3, verses 5-7 the following words of Jesus are recorded: “I tell you the truth no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: You must be born again.”**

**You know, many individuals may question why God allows bad things to happen. Why does He allow someone to drive under the influence of any mind-altering substance? Why does He allow individuals to kill offensively instead of only defensively?**

**Other questions such as these may be added to those I just mentioned. And too many individuals use these seemingly unanswerable questions to dismiss any belief in a Creator. But man can’t have it both ways! It wouldn’t work!**

**How would it be if God was to allow free choice only in certain areas? Well, without a lengthy discussion, it simply wouldn’t be free choice at all.**

**Each person must accept the ramifications of their own choices.**

**God’s design is for us to balance the heart (soul) and the mind to successfully interact with one another. When any individual relies on brain power and doesn’t balance judgments with their heart, decisions tend to be driven by ego. Likewise, decisions driven only by feelings may produce an impulsive or inappropriate response.**

**Balancing knowledge with compassion leads to sound judgement and the key element in this equation is the heart (spirit) element.**

**God’s truth actually uncovers the reality which clearly reveals both good and evil do exist. This fact alone helped me to realign my priorities and helped me to slow-down and think before I speak.**

**Those first few years after Jason passed away, Jeff shared many things with me. We enjoyed each other’s company, but I think our time together was mostly therapeutic. Both of our families drew even closer during those years.**

**When I was sixteen years old, I remember Jeff shared one thing which really made a lasting impression. It was the idea of living from the “inside-out”. Sounds like an odd thing to say, doesn’t it? But, actually it’s a good thing to live inside-out.**

**Many individuals may feel as if life is all upside-down and inside-out anyway. Well, the upside-down part of life may be a topic for another book. However, to live inside-out is an option to respond to life rather than to simply react to life. To react is simply to jump ahead and not think things through.**

**Jeff explained to me that to respond is to evaluate the situation and take the path which produces the best result. When we rely on God’s truth through his Holy Spirit inside of us, truth will be the guide which speaks to us and will drive an outward response.**

**Knowing Jason’s story as I do and in light of the challenges I now face in life, it’s my daily understanding that:**

**“The more I learn, the less I realize I know!”**

**I think this isn’t the prevailing approach concerning wisdom in our society at large. Many people hold a mindset which simply looks for the easiest way through life’s difficulties.**

**Life isn’t easy. God doesn’t promise us that. He does promise to never leave or forsake us.**

**My wife, Christie, and I now have four beautiful young adult children. Our three boys are very intelligent young men. Communication for them is very easy. Our daughter, however, was born with an extremely rare and complicated brain malformation. As a result, her brain has a difficult time communicating with her own body, let alone with other people.**

**Each day is a challenge. As she approaches her fifteenth year, she still struggles with poor gross and fine motor skills, speech, the ability to chew her food properly, and cognitively presents herself at a two to three-year-old level.**

**Her biggest daily health struggle has been uncontrolled Epilepsy, now in its sixth year.**

**Life can be a challenge. Christie and I know somethings in our lives will be out of our control, but we take heart for God will always maintain control. He is Truth! Through our relationship with him, we are given all the wisdom, patience, and love we need to make it through each day.**

**God provided for us the only way in which we may have a real relationship with him. It’s through the unbelievable sacrifice of God’s son; Jesus finished his work by dying on a cross for us all.**

**At the end of his suffering he cried out: “It is finished.”**

**And with those last three words, Jesus took his last breath.**

**But three days later, the door to God’s house was permanently opened for us, when Jesus broke the bonds with death by rising up, back to life, alive for us all.**

**Accepting the free gift of God’s own Spirit, through His Son’s love and sacrifice, will produce a rich life here on earth for your physical body, and eternal richness and immeasurable joy for your soul.**

***“Even though everyone is totally unique, our fundamental need is uniquely the same.”***

**I don’t mean to be rude by asking you: “How are you spending your time? Are you focused on the one person looking at you in the mirror, or all the others who may be standing beyond the mirror? Are you spending countless hours alone on battery-operated devices or are you socially engaged in building lasting relationships?”**

**We are made for relationships. In part, we are to have relationships with all those people we meet through life’s journey, but mostly with the One who created us in the first place. The choice is yours.**

**I certainly don’t have all the answers. I learn new things every day and some of them I wish would have never come my way. Life is not easy.**

**Yes, I wish our daughter were healed now, but I know she will be healed one day.**

**And yes, I feel Jason’s life ended far too soon for my liking. I still miss him every day.**

**But I know Jason’s reward and my reward are the same. Therefore, I will have to wait a little longer for our spirits to meet again. After all, God has not yet finished the work he has planned for me.**