**Sample Chapter**

**An Intimate Collision – Encounters with Life and Jesus**

**Chapter 4**

**A Leather Belt and a Three Dollar Buckle**

**What Defines My Life?**

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”

I John 4:18 (NIV)

"The unexamined life is not worth living."

- Socrates

Gangly and pimple faced, Jonathon stood pensively on the arriving cusp of adolescence. Staring down a long corridor of his life, the path wound from uncertainty to uncertainty. His movements were cumbersome and terribly awkward, having been set to the chaotic cadence of abuse. Stumbling and uncoordinated, he tripped across a life script measured out and metered in notes of deep pain. Long pencil thin limbs that, despite enduring effort, found little ability to flow and function in unison. Deftly uncoordinated, he bumbled through life. Wiry glasses were set canted across a thin face of confusion, pain and fear. Worn polyester pants and thin cotton shirts were the stuff of thrift stores and second hand shops. His was indeed a second hand life.

Fingers inept and fearful pensively reached out to the world around him. He desperately tried to be right and do right in order to have that world nod in agreement at some success, despite how minor. Each effort was slapped with the thick rod of ridicule and beaten with words dipped deep in the slurry of caustic criticism. Inevitably he would crawl away into dark corners of his bedroom and his life where he drew up into deep shadows, wincing and crying. His heart and his body were strewn with senseless lacerations that knew no solace except isolation. He was alone; desperately so.

Jonathon was barely twelve years of age and already an outcast. He was relegated out beyond the fringes of society by parents who birthed him, then rejected him. Parents who beat a helpless baby, who abused an infant whose tiny eyes pooled with the desire for acceptance in the very midst of rejection. Parents seized and satiated with incomprehensible evil, parents who extinguished cigarettes on his tender skin and snuffed out hope in his confused heart. Who dropped him on his head for personal amusement and levity. Repeatedly, they had forced him naked into the backyard with welts swelling across his back from the sharp snap of Dad’s thick leather belt. There were relentless beatings for trifling mistakes, most times for no mistakes at all. Many nights he was left outside to sleep with the dog while the rest of world slept inside.

Sexual abuse would follow, rendering him a helpless party to the most putrid of human actions, culminating in the violation of a life too small to protect itself much less comprehend any need to do so. A life too tender and too innocent to understand the abuse perpetrated upon it. He found himself peering back, a face of innocence pressed against the glass from outside the world, longing to belong. There was a simple and unsullied yearning to have the world invite him back in. For it to create a place that would tell him that he mattered, that he had value and that he counted for something more than nothing.

Jonathon was a reject in likely the most complete form I have ever encountered. A discarded piece of emotionally maimed humanity wrapped in a twelve year old body. His pain had deeply marinated throughout a tender twelve year old soul, injecting a toxicity that poisoned the very essence of his humanity. His was a life sopped and seeping in the blood of a soul martyred for the amusement of troubled parents. His was a heart mutilated for merriment. A life sacrificed for the sick sexual pleasure of others. A depository of deviance, his life was depleted at twelve. And when he was no longer of value to those who had used him, the drama was raised to a crescendo of accumulated cruelty . . . he was discarded.

He was finally abandoned on a desolate road that stretched into a desert of nothingness with little more than cactus, brittle sage and an endless ribbon of simmering asphalt. Waves of shimmering heat rippled the arid landscape and sucked the desert dry. He was exactly the same inside. Eventually he was found wandering and dehydrated by a kind deputy sheriff. And it was here in the psychiatric hospital that I met the remnant of this little boy. The pieces that were left of whatever he once was, if he was ever anything.

I could only presuppose what Jonathon would have been like had he not lived those twelve years of hell. What could he have been, what would he have been? Latent deep under layers of stratified emotional chaos that marked the epochs of his life, there laid a glint of something profound, something precious. It was there and it was real despite the magnitude of his outbursts, the innumerable moments when the accumulated carnage of his life would erupt to the surface in the molten magma of rage, rendering him a seething vegetable of the abuses of others. Even then there was something remarkable about him, something flagrantly rich and wonderful that even his most outrageous moment could not hide.

Victor Hugo wrote, “To love beauty is to see light.” It may be that we don’t see beauty because we’ve spurned it and not permitted enough of its light into our lives in order to see it in the first place. Within Jonathon there were flecks of diamonds in the midst of his detonations. His was a gifted child beaten and abused into human oblivion; a wonderment grossly misshapen by cruel hands into an oddity; a freak. But it was still there, something precious; gross in its deformity, but there. And I saw it with whatever light I had.

**Belts and Abuse**

Jonathon refused to wear belts. Much of the beatings he had incurred were at the hands of a thick leather belt deftly used by his father. Seasoned and supple by countless beatings, it had been cinched tightly around his hands to hold him while the sexual excesses of others were perpetrated upon him. Drawn tight around his neck, it had coerced obedience from horror. It was anything but a fashion accessory. Rather, it was an instrument of horror and a tool of terror; an implement of undiluted evil.

When his father’s belt was confiscated by the authorities, it was found to have traces of blood splattered across its leather surface. Bits of skin were found embedded in crevices; a testament to brutality. Jonathon would not wear a belt. No wonder. The sight of a belt would traumatize him, rendering him a fleshy infantile pile of trembling humanity that whimpered in the labyrinth of a million horrid memories of abuse; each screaming at the top of its lungs, callously throwing their sordid pictures vividly across the forefront of a panicked mind. The torrential deluge of years inundated a brutalized heart that had no more defense against the memories than he had when they were originally seared into his brain and branded on his heart. Seizing him in the clutches of memory that seemed as real as the original moment, Jonathon was an unwitting prisoner shackled to the horror of his past. I often cried for him. So did others. Sometimes, I still do.

Belts . . . I would never wear mine around Jonathon. The symbolism was so stringent and overpowering for him that he could not see beyond the belt to the person. His mind halted at the specter. Its symbolism was so deeply entrenched by the welts and blood that its presence was consuming. He would melt and utterly disintegrate at the sight of one. And so I never wore one. Ever.

**It Rules Us**

“What do you want with us?” (Luke 4:34, NIV). Confused and disoriented, the man heard caustic words leap out of his own mouth that were not his own. These mysterious utterances were oddly brazen yet somehow tentative, sounding like nothing that would represent who he was. The experience was dreamlike and inescapably surreal. This bewildered man valiantly struggled against whatever this was that seemed to have commandeered his voice. The words and the sadistic inflections within which they were encased were fired and then detonated in the midst of the listeners, sending satanic shrapnel throughout the temple.

There was the terminally sick feeling that something cold and wholly destitute of any shred of humanity had fully invaded and conquered him, setting up a stalwart stronghold with unassailable ramparts. Wrestle as he might against whatever it was that held him, he was effortlessly subdued by it; finding himself some sort of helpless marionette in a rancid, fiendish drama. If our denial and insensibilities grant us some leeway, we realize that there are times when we find ourselves held captive in just the same morbid way.

The voice was bold, flagrant and narcissistically flamboyant. It projected itself as pompous, cynical, emotionally taunting and powerful. Controlling the hapless man, the words that were vomited out from within him seemed to slither about the room filled with venom, striking here and then there, shaking the congregants that had gathered.

The contemptuous attitude of Satan was obviously unchanged since he was cast from heaven with his minions. Satanic evil has no means of redemption because it will not permit itself any. Evil is not an option for Satan as it is his very character and core essence. And so it remains unchanged as change would cause him to cease to exist, a thought that likely enrages him.

Raw and fiendish, the demon who had abducted the soul of this man delivered a razor-sharp taunt and issued an arrogant challenge. Unabated evil can become so enamored by the frenzy of its own blackness that it counts itself invincible, even when facing the Messiah. It spun the man around to look at Jesus. Canting and staring through slanted eyes, it snarled, “Have you come to destroy us?” Whatever the spirit was, it was blatantly and arrogantly testing the resolve of God by overstating his strength as that of many. An intimate collision was set to occur that was but a portent of a cataclysmic battle that stood not far away on the horizon of time staked with three crosses.

Suddenly the demon executed an audacious maneuver, an attempt to exercise power by naming the adversary. “I know who you are - the Holy One of God!” (Luke 4:34, NIV) he said. The vying for the power of this single life in this single place commenced with an agenda for every life precisely and even intimately mirrored in this single one. The enemy had infiltrated a soul and had infiltrated the very house of God. Indeed, it was a deft and cunning act. By doing so, he had shown his deceptive ability as profound . . . marvelous even. Here was full blown evil walking among God’s people entirely unnoticed until it unveiled itself. Too often, full blown evil walks among us unnoticed. Too often, full blown evil works within us unnoticed.

The worst of all evil may be invisible evil. I am reminded that evil can insert itself in the very places where I would naturally assume its absence and therefore miss its presence. To evil, nothing is sacred. The demons contempt for God was as commensurate as the raw evil that defined him; evil resident even in belts.

The battle was then engaged. Jesus had seen this before. There was at one time a great battle in heaven where evil took excessive stock of itself, arrogantly regaled itself as superior, betrayed God and was vanquished with the betrayer being cast to the earth wrapped in the rage of his own defeat. The result is that he now roams that domain with a single intent to which his allegiance is nothing but militant . . . the destruction of mankind. If he cannot destroy God, he will destroy that which bears His image. And sadly, he has performed that task with great flair and appalling efficiency. He was performing it here, yet again, right in front of Jesus himself.

A decisive countermove is made by Jesus. “Be quiet . . . come out of him” (Luke 4:35, NIV) He says. The two things that lead to freedom were pronounced: the silencing of that which haunts us, and then its removal. We are terribly inept at performing those tasks, and so we errantly assume that it’s really rather impotent and more the stuff of whimsy. But when God speaks these things, things change forever.

The words of Jesus fall and there was a sudden internal wrenching in the man that was not of the man, but the colliding and engaging of two opposing forces fighting for the supremacy of the man. Tearing at the man’s core, they met in lethal combat on the battlefield of his soul, seeking the timeless trophy of his soul. In the savagery of the spiritual skirmish, the man was thrown and helplessly flung to the floor, heaving a thrall of deep panic and perpetrating confusion throughout the crowded room.

The two opposing forces vying for his life were infinitely superior to the sum total of his own energies. He was a helpless physical manifestation of a titanic inward clash where irreconcilable forces sought to occupy the same space and make the same claim. As soon as it had begun, it was over. The battlefield was cleared of the enemy. The diabolical forces that had stood arrayed across the landscape of his life were suddenly, inexplicably silent and then absent. The landscape suddenly transitioned from being a torn and ravaged battlefield to a topography that was listlessly placid, hushed with silence, verdantly lush and sufficiently fertile for birthing a new life. All was now still and quiet which was likely something that had become entirely unfamiliar to the man ravaged by evil.

Cognizance wistfully stirred within the man, tentatively at first and then with greater force. The caustic fog of possession thinned, drifted and then dissipated. “Where am I?” might have been the first question rising from a groggy mind tentatively peering out around the corner of a cell door now opened; freed to ask that question and a million others as well. In what place had the demonic force left him at that moment? At what place in his life? Wherever that might be, was there any hope that he could go anywhere from wherever here was?

He was likely uncertain who he was much less where he was; his identity having long been stolen by an occupying force bent on thievery. That identity was now restored by a liberating force with the occupying force having been swept away by the holy and passionate blitzkrieg of God unleashed, scourging all traces of evil from his life. The lock was smashed, the prison door was flung open, and now there were nothing but gaping and unhindered horizons at his feet. Too often we have forgotten what horizons look like because prison walls block our view of them.

Freedom was an unfamiliar and alien feeling to him, something that his recollections of were too dim and too frail to recall with any clarity. Freedom demanded that he must now initiate, he must decide, he must determine what to do next in the massive void of decisions no longer being dictated by an occupying enemy. There were no walls, only horizons. There were no chains, only chances. There were no fetters, only freedom.

Freedom brings the privilege to make decisions, but the need to once again learn how to rightly make them. Maxwell Anderson said, “This liberty will look easy by and by when nobody dies to get it.” Our responsibility in our freedom is in recognizing the astronomical price Jesus paid for that freedom. Out of that understanding we must always respect our freedom as both entirely undeserving and utterly priceless. For the man, it was a strange and entirely unfamiliar place to be. And so he lay on the floor paralyzed by freedom.

His eyes slowly cleared and sharpened, becoming tighter with discernment as the seconds ticked by. A calloused hand, thick and broad rested gently on a dazed shoulder; that of a carpenter seasoned by constructing lives and hardened for the pending rigor of saving them. The face behind the hand was firm, but warm; intentional, but unexplainably relaxed. The silence of irrefutable victory marked His features as well as the stirring confidence to bring victory; a calm of unarguable confidence that defined Jesus’ eyes as something more than eyes.

Deep in the chiseled face there bespoke authority, but of a far different kind that was wholly trustworthy and entirely indisputable; the kind of authority that you can rest in without any forethought as to its ability to perfectly hold you. An authority inexplicably superior to that which had ruled the man; so vastly superior that it can ill be defined even when all the definitions of mankind itself are gathered and brought to bear upon it. It’s the power of authentic freedom that both begs and invites one onward to wild liberation; the ecstatic ecstasy of all the assorted shackles and fetters of enslavement having dropped powerless to the floor of one’s life. All of the barriers to restoration and to the making of one complete had both been vanquished and have vanished. The authority now to restore his assets and his course in life to its original intent had decisively acted. He was himself . . . himself restored.

**What Possesses Me Defines Me**

I am a muddled compilation of myriad things that define me. Things that lay their claim to my life, exercise control over it, and proclaim by virtue of these things that I am this or that. The agreements that I have made with these things do indeed allow them to define me. The manner in which I allow them to convince me that what they say about me is true leaves me a fool and a subservient buffoon. I empower them when I surrender by agreeing that I am what they have defined me to be. If there is ever a point where I question the things that have attempted to define me, I’ve so lost myself in them that I don’t know enough of who I am to question them in the first place. Therefore, I default to their definitions as I have no other definition to base my life upon.

However, there is on occasion that voice that shouts “I am other than this”! There is that voice that is hauntingly distant and nearly indiscernible, yet a truer part of myself than anything else. Despite the terribly whispered nature of it, it screams truth that renders its whisper a thundering shout. Truth even in the most whispered tones will always roar.

Because of that simple voice, there is then a momentary wrestling and contending with what controls me. My own past and the things that illicit that past are much like the demon that possessed the man, and much like a leather belt that possessed Jonathon. These things are vastly stronger and I am haplessly subdued by them in the wrestling. I eventually surrender to something less than authentic. I surrender to a tragically marginalized self that is set against the real self. Even when I choose to fight against that marginalized self, I find myself subdued by it anyway. Far too often I have no power to break it and I am therefore doomed to surrendering who I authentically am. I am doomed to being imprisoned by the thing that imprisons me.

Yet, this possessed man was on the floor before Jesus and that which possessed him was utterly broken. An alien and unfamiliar sense of some authentic self rushed in and flooded the very concourses of his life with something genuine. It deluged the corridors of his soul and inundated him with himself, with everything that made him uniquely him, despite the fact that he was an alien to himself. It was all terribly unfamiliar but perfectly familiar all at once. He was, in essence, freed to be born again. On the floor, the birth had begun.

The murmur of the congregants, bound by awe finally found their voices. The sound of awestruck humanity drew the man back to consciousness. This indescribable Jesus was now kneeling before him, His eyes intent, both knowing the birth and watching it transpire; this man being created again for the second time. This prophet, this Jesus drew in the wonder of if all over again. Jesus is relentlessly fascinated by new birth as it is never diminished or dissipated for Him. Love creates out of love and because of love. Love can do nothing else. If love is not creating it is not loving, therefore it must always be about the busy business of creating. If love possesses a point of weakness that renders it vulnerable in order that it may be complete, this is it. Jesus loves, and here a soul was created yet again.

Scripture records no words exchanged between Jesus and the man. The speculation of conversation is left to the fog and lost pages of history. But birth needs no explanation because there is nothing else like it. It is the manifest love of God expressing its infinite fullness in a finite package. It is God funneling His infinite characteristics into a human form so terribly limited, but created with limitations yet so vast that God finds ample room to manifest Himself in it. It’s terribly marvelous yet wholly mysterious and no effort of man no matter how elegant or purposeful can explain that.

I am no different. I too am possessed. Maybe differently with different things, but it is possession nonetheless. These things claim me, they control me, they strip me of the infinite characteristics embedded by God in my truest self and they give me a diminished, dismembered and marred identity at which I am frequently aghast. Worse yet is to accept this identity in the defeat of self for I doubt there are few things as horrible as accepting that we are less than what God created us to be. Indeed, it is God who can wrench those things out of my life. It is God Who can sweep clean the battlefield of my soul and deluge me with the unique characteristics that define the work of the Master in me.

And so, the man reached up and clasped the hand of his liberator. The grip was firm as it always is and always will be. He was about to step into this new life. The power of Jesus’ grasp was so sure and so strong that the man was thrust to his feet. Jesus’ hand, calloused, thick and broad rested its weight on his teetering shoulder. The assembled congregants were lost in the emotional catacombs of unbelief, astonishment and euphoric emotional trauma. They were immobilized by the impossible and stunned by the spectacular. One more look deep into His eyes and the two parted ways. He had met his Maker, and in that meeting his Maker remade him.

**Another Belt**

There is a tap on my shoulder. By now, I had developed a relationship with Jonathon; so had several others. Trust had been nurtured in the rich loam of consistent love, its seeds having been cradled in the tepid warmth of time spent. Soft waters of gentle affirmation had been tenderly applied to numerous wounds had soaked through rough husks and softened parched seeds. Their heads were now pressing above the surface, and now, a tap on my shoulder.

I turned. It was Jonathon. And in his hand was something most remarkable. In feeble hands he held a leather belt. But much more, it was a leather belt that he had made and shaped and crafted himself; with his own hands. Setting his hands and his heart to the very thing that struck such terror in his heart, it was intricate and ornate; crafted to perfection by hands that were beaten and tied by just such an object. He had stained it to beautiful brown hues. And then, a brass buckle deeply polished so that light would effortlessly dance with abandon on its nearly glassy surface. “It cost me three dollars” he said. On the buckle . . . my name: “Craig.” “I’m not afraid anymore,” he said. “See, I’m not afraid anymore!”

The world stopped. All went quiet around me and dissipated into that belt and the gangly twelve year old who held it out to me. A broad smile of success was drawn from one side of his thin face clear to the other. Relishing in his victory, he was born again; a second birth. Maybe for Jonathon, it was his first. I don’t know. And then the words that forced me to catch myself as their weight fell . . . “It’s for you. I made it for you.” I took in my hands the very thing that had imprisoned this marvelous young man, and the very thing from which he was now liberated. He had lived its messages. He had been held captive to their assorted horrors. His life had been dictated by them, and now he was free. His thin arms were outstretched with the belt laying draped across tender hands. He handed me a symbol of the very thing that had held him. We hugged and we cried. When I replay those moments in my mind yet today, wherever Jonathon’s at, I hug him and still cry.

Today, some thirty years later I still have that belt. I always will. For it is a reminder of what held Jonathon and defined his life. But far greater and far grander, it is evidence that we need not be held by that which holds us; that we all can be remade.

**Pondering Point**

There is something in every life that holds us and defines us. Something that so shapes us that we come to believe that we are that thing, or that event, or that piece or part of our history. We become helplessly defined in ways that are other than who and what we really are. We are held captive to a life that is not that for which we were crafted and created.

It is no small thing to realize this. And it is a marvelous thing to break from it. It is about realizing that Jesus frees us from that which we can’t liberate ourselves. He frees us when we are completely blind to our own captivity and when we have confused imprisonment with freedom. When we embrace the reality of that which binds us, and we hold fast to the belief that the choice to be freed from it is ours to make, we can strip it of its powerful, hold it in our hands without fear and shout to the world, “I’m not afraid anymore.”

**A Thought**

* What defines my life and defines me?
* Where do those definitions come from?
* What have I lost in embracing them as defining who I truly am?
* Am I willing to break from them and be who God created me to be?