

LEADING THE WAY THROUGH

DANIEL

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



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Introduction

Can One Person Make a Difference?

In March 2005, I returned from an international speaking trip to find my home city, Atlanta, in the grip of terror. On Friday, March 11, a man named Brian Nichols was transported to the new Justice Tower in downtown Atlanta for his retrial on rape and other violent felony charges. As a woman deputy removed Nichols's handcuffs to allow him to change into civilian clothes, he brutally beat her, stole her gun, and escaped.

In a daylong rampage, Nichols shot five people, hijacked cars, and melted into the crowd at Lenox Square in Buckhead, not far from our church. No one knew where he had gone—or where he might appear next. One person, one evildoer, had thrown a major metroplex into panic.

A couple of hours after midnight, another person entered the story—a woman named Ashley Smith. This young woman had recently committed her life to Christ and was seeking to grow in a relationship with the Lord. Her husband had been murdered several

years before, and she was looking for a new job to better provide for herself and her five-year-old daughter. She had just moved to a new apartment and was unpacking boxes at 2:00 a.m. when she decided to run a quick errand to a convenience store. It was a fateful decision.

As she left her apartment, Ashley noticed a man sitting in a pickup nearby. He was still there when she returned a few minutes later. As she inserted her key in the front door, the man came up behind her and forced her into the apartment. Ashley realized she had just been taken hostage by Brian Nichols.

The fugitive gunman tied Ashley up with an extension cord, then sat down and began talking with her. She explained to Nichols that her husband had been murdered, and if he killed her as well, her little girl would be left with no mommy and no daddy. The nightmare of Ashley's captivity continued through the night, and she kept talking to Nichols, trying to gain his trust. She asked if she could read to him, and he agreed. So Ashley read aloud from her Bible and from a devotional book.

Nichols told her he had hurt some people, and he didn't want to hurt anyone else. He just wanted to rest in her home for a few days. As Ashley continued talking to Nichols about her family and her faith, he told her that he was lost and he believed God led him to her. He even called her an "angel" sent from God.

"What do you think I should do?" he asked.

"Turn yourself in," she said. "If you don't, lots more people are going to get hurt. And you're probably going to die."

As he watched news reports about his escape and crime spree on TV, he said, "I cannot believe that's me."

Finally, Nichols let Ashley go. She left the apartment and immediately called 911. Moments later, at ten in the morning, a SWAT team arrived at the apartment. By noon, police had taken Nichols into custody without incident.

Ashley Smith was praised for her courage and levelheaded thinking during the hours she was held hostage. She was interviewed many times on television, and witnessed to her faith in Jesus Christ before millions of TV viewers nationwide. Her witness to Brian Nichols spared her life, and probably spared his life as well. Her witness also blessed the nation.

She told the press, “I have experienced just about every emotion one can imagine in the span of just a few days. Throughout my time with Mr. Nichols, I continued to rely on my faith in God. God has helped me through tough times before, and he’ll help me now... Thank you for your prayers and may God bless you all.”¹

Can one person make a difference? Absolutely! One person can make a difference for evil—or for good. That difference may impact one life or it may impact millions of lives. The difference one life makes could have eternal consequences. That’s the overarching theme of the book of Daniel: One committed believer can make all the difference in the world.

Now, more than ever before, we need to understand the lessons of the life of Daniel—lessons in making a world-changing difference for God. One person plus God is always a majority. No matter how troubled the world may be, no matter how dark and terrifying the circumstances, you can be God’s chosen instrument making a positive difference at the crossroads of history.

That was the theme of Daniel’s life. And it can be the theme of your life as well. Turn the page with me as we plunge into Bible history, and together let’s discover God’s amazing plan for your future.

Your Indelible Identity

Daniel 1:1-9

Once, while visiting a friend, I was in his kitchen and saw a little postcard taped to the refrigerator door. It read: “Remember, God has something up his sleeve besides his everlasting arm.”

That is good advice, and we should remember those words whenever we are under pressure, under threat, or under stress. No matter how bleak our situation, God always has something up his sleeve. He always has a plan and a purpose for our lives—and for the ages. His plan covers every detail, every need, every problem of your life.

Now, that doesn’t mean that you and I will necessarily understand his plan in our lifetime. We could not begin to comprehend his Master Blueprint for the universe or for our individual lives. Our minds are finite and his is infinite. For reasons that are often baffling to us, God sometimes allows us to go through intense pressure and trouble. We all experience good times and bad times in varying proportions. No one understood this principle better than this faithful prophet of the Old Testament.

In the third year of the reign of King Jehoiakim, 605 BC, the Babylonian army rumbled like a juggernaut across the land of Israel, destroying Jerusalem and laying waste the villages and the countryside. Daniel and his people were captured and led away in chains into captivity in Babylon. There Daniel was educated in the philosophies and pagan ideas of Babylon.

Though Daniel was taught these alien and ungodly ways, he never embraced them or converted to them. He remained true to the God of Israel in his heart. Because Daniel embraced the true wisdom of his God, his reputation grew and he became a prominent advisor in the royal court of Babylon. He was one of the bright, rising stars of Israel who served in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. There, he experienced the fullness of God's purpose for his life.

Even though Daniel experienced suffering, anxiety, humiliation, and persecution as a captive of the Babylonians, God had a plan for Daniel's life. It was not a backup plan. God did not have to shift from Plan A to Plan B because of unexpected circumstances. The Babylonian invasion did not come as a surprise to God. All the events of Daniel's life were accounted for by God, and he worked all of those events together in Daniel's life to accomplish his positive purpose in a negative world. God had a plan to use Daniel as a strong witness for his truth and a strong encouragement for his people, even though they were exiles in a heathen land.

A limitless God

Here is the beginning of Daniel's story:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the

house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego (Daniel 1:1-7).

God provided for Daniel in exile. He placed Daniel in the king's most elite training and education program. He arranged for a mentoring relationship between Daniel and one of the king's most trusted aides. And Daniel remained faithful to the God of Israel. So, in verse 9, we see that God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs. God elevated Daniel to a position of far-reaching impact and influence. Not only did Daniel's influence affect the king, and through the king the entire kingdom of Babylon, but his influence has echoed down through the ages, affecting millions of believers, including you and me.

Daniel is a role model, an example to us of the power of one person to make a difference. His story speaks to us across the ages and reminds us of what God is able to do through the life of one yielded, faithful servant. As we witness the life of this committed young man, let's open our minds and hearts to believe that God can do anything—*absolutely anything!*—through our lives as well.

One of the key lessons of Daniel's life is that God is with us in

times of trial, persecution, and temptation. We can always count on God to have a plan and a purpose for the difficult circumstances we face. His purposes are ultimately for *eternal good*.

God's power is never wasted. God's plan is never thwarted. Everything he does is focused on a purpose—and his purposes are not bound to any finite time or fixed place. God's purposes are for eternity. No matter what happens to you, if you will stand firm on God's principles as Daniel did, if you will trust God to work in you and through you and around you as Daniel did, you can have 100 percent confidence that what God has planned for your life will have an *eternal* impact.

This is great news! It means that when you and God lock arms—your finite, earthly arms linked with his infinite, everlasting arms—you cannot fail. You *will* have an impact on your world. You *will* have an impact on eternity. Every act of kindness you perform, every word of blessing you speak, every stand you take for truth and righteousness, and every godly relationship you maintain becomes a building block God uses to construct his kingdom.

In this life, you may experience what looks like a setback, a failure, the end of everything—but God has something up his sleeve. You may be surprised by the events of this life, but nothing surprises him. So take heart. You are never alone. Your faithfulness and willingness to stand against pressure and persecution will not go unnoticed. You are connected to a limitless God. The power he makes available to you is as unlimited as God himself.

Who are you?

What is your nickname? If you're a doctor or a professor, people may call you Doc. If you work with electrical equipment, people may call you Sparky. If you have a reputation for being especially brainy, then you've probably been called Einstein a time or two. A tall and slender physique will earn you the nickname Slim or Beanpole. I

once heard of one man who nicknamed his wife Red when they were in their twenties and her hair was auburn, and he continued to call her Red long after her hair had turned completely gray.

Often, it's your surname that gives you away. When my Atlanta neighbors hear my last name, Youssef, they instantly know that I'm not from around these parts, even though I have lived in Atlanta for more than three decades. They don't have to see my face or hear my voice; they just have to hear my name to know that I'm not a good ol' boy from the South.

In the ancient world, your name was your identity. Your name didn't merely mark you as a member of this family or that clan. Your name said something about you. It described the kind of person you were. It especially described your character.

Most babies in Bible times were not named until eight days after their birth. This gave parents a little time to notice the characteristics of their child—not just physical traits but personality traits, behavior, and other indications about that child's true nature. It was a custom in Bible times for mothers to spend hours singing and talking to their newborn children, bonding with them in a deeply emotional and spiritual way. Through this time of bonding, mothers could gain a special insight into the personalities and even the destinies of their children.

The book of Daniel tells the story of four young men of Israel—Daniel and his three companions. Each of these young men had a name that revealed much about his character. When they were born, their parents gave them names that *revealed* their identity and character and helped *shape* their identity and character.

- Daniel's name meant "God has judged."
- Hananiah's name meant "Yahweh has been gracious."
- Mishael's name meant "Who is like God?"
- Azariah's name meant "Yahweh has helped."

Each of these names is fitting in its own way. Daniel's name is especially appropriate because the prophet Daniel repeatedly prophesied God's judgment upon the idolatry and arrogance of the Gentile nation of Babylon. Moreover, the book of Daniel makes clear that he was gifted in administration, and he exercised wise and godly judgment throughout his career.

Hananiah's name was equally fitting. He knew the gracious nature of God. Mishael understood that there was nobody else like God. Azariah knew that Yahweh was still the One who helped them. These three men knew without any doubt that God's mercy and sovereign protection were behind the miracles they experienced throughout their years in Babylon.

These four young men were just teenagers when the Babylonian invaders tore them away from their families and their homeland. Daniel was only fourteen years old, and he was probably the oldest of the four.

God allowed King Nebuchadnezzar to conquer the land of Israel and take some of the best and brightest of Israel's youth, along with the wealth of the nation. God told Israel through his prophets that Israel's captivity would last seventy years, but Daniel and his friends didn't know with certainty that they would live to see Israel's captivity end. As far as they knew, they would live out their lives and die in Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar was ruthless—and smart. He prized talent, intelligence, and ability, and these four young men of Israel possessed all of these qualities. So Nebuchadnezzar took the cream of Israel's male population to the city of Babylon and subjected them to a training regimen so intense it bordered on brainwashing. Nebuchadnezzar planned to use these brilliant young men as tools to expand his power and influence in the world, but first he had to bend them to his purposes.

The first step in indoctrinating these young men was to give

them new Babylonian identities that would cancel out their Jewish identity as servants of the God of Israel. According to their new Babylonian names, they were now the servants of pagan Babylonian deities. The chief of the eunuchs gave Daniel the Babylonian name Belteshazzar, which means “keeper of the hidden treasure of Bel.” Bel was the supreme Babylonian deity. In fact, Bel was another name for Baal, a false god who was well-known to the Israelites because Baal was worshipped by their enemies in Canaan.

Hananiah was renamed Shadrach, a name linked to the Babylonian moon god. Mishael was renamed Meshach, corrupting the meaning of his name from “Who is like God?” to “Who is like the moon god?” And Azariah was renamed Abednego, meaning he was a servant of the Babylonian god of wisdom, Nego (or Nabu). Nebuchadnezzar had uprooted their identity. No longer were these young men to be known as servants of the God of Israel. Henceforth, they were to be called servants of the gods of Babylon.

Even though the Babylonians changed their names, these courageous and faithful Hebrew teenagers refused to let go of their identity as servants of Yahweh. They continued to worship their God. They continued to pray to him and trust him. Everything about their speech and behavior reflected their belief in Yahweh and their utter rejection of the pagan gods of Babylon. This is a crucial lesson for you and me today.

Who does God say you are?

The Babylonians tried to alter the identity of these four young Hebrew men by changing their names, but the attempt failed. It didn't matter what the Babylonians called Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. God still knew them by their original names—names that spoke of his ownership of their lives. God still knew them as God-Has-Judged, Yahweh-Has-Been-Gracious, Who-Is-Like-God? and Yahweh-Has-Helped.

And God loves and knows you in exactly the same way. The world may try to slap another label on you. Some people might call you Religious Fanatic, Goody Two-shoes, Bible Thumper, or Pulpit Pounder. Some perfectly decent Christians have been labeled Intolerant Extremists or American Taliban because they dared to suggest that godliness and moral values produce a happier and healthier society. But no matter what label the world tries to impose on you, God knows you by the beautiful label of *Christian*. You wear the name of his Son, Jesus Christ. Because you follow Jesus, because you accept the shed blood of Christ as the atonement for your sins, the name of Jesus is written on your life. When God calls you his beloved child, that is your true identity.

God has a unique plan and purpose for your life. Nobody else can fulfill your part of God's plan—only *you*. As you embrace the truth that you are a unique and irreplaceable part of God's plan, then you begin to understand what the power of one really means. You were not created to be like any other person. Your role is to be the one and only irreplaceable you that God created you to be.

Do you truly believe that you are the person God says you are? Do you trust him to carry out his eternal plan through your life? Do you believe he is willing and able to use you to accomplish great things for his kingdom? God's Word tells us that, as people who have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we are:

- *Righteous*. We have “right standing” with God. We are not righteous because of what *we* have accomplished or earned, but because of what *Jesus* accomplished for us on the cross. (See Romans 3:21-22; 5:19; 10:4.)
- *Forgiven*. The slate of your past and mine has been wiped clean. Now we are free to move forward with our lives—and free to serve God and receive his blessings and rewards. (See Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:13-14; 1 John 1:9; 2:12.)

- *Destined for eternal life.* Our heavenly home is already under construction because of what Jesus has done on our behalf. (See John 3:16; 3:36; 6:40; 17:3; Romans 6:23; 1 Timothy 1:16; Titus 3:4-7; 1 John 5:11.)
- *Indwelt by the Holy Spirit.* The Spirit of Truth is present in the lives of all who have received Jesus as Lord and Savior. He leads us and guides us into the right way to respond in all situations. The Holy Spirit gives us the power to obey God's commandments and to live changed lives. (See John 7:37-39; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Ephesians 1:13.)
- *Beloved of God.* The Bible gives us a long list of attributes that God has for his children. Perhaps the most important of those attributes is that we are *beloved*. We are God's cherished children, heirs with Jesus Christ of the fullness of God's kingdom. (See John 14:21; Romans 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 1:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:16.)

If you don't know what God says about you, if you don't know that his name is stamped upon you, then you will continually find yourself intimidated and swayed by the labels others put on you. The world will call you Wimp for turning the other cheek when people persecute you—but God will commend you for your Christ-like strength. The world will call you Stupid for giving sacrificially to the work of God—but God will bring you a harvest of blessings. The world will call you Weak because you need religion as your spiritual crutch—but God will make his infinite power available to you in a way that will astound the world.

Don't trust the world to give you your identity. The identity the world gives you is flawed and false. As the apostle Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans

12:2). Don't chase after the identities that are prized in this world: Rich, Successful, Powerful, Famous, or Cool. There's nothing necessarily wrong with having money, success, authority, fame—and there's not even anything wrong with being cool. But don't chase after those things. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, as Jesus said, and God will provide everything you need (see Matthew 6:33).

It is God who elevates some to positions of prominence. It is God who gives people the ability and opportunity to make money and manage it well. It is God who allows us to live, who keeps our hearts beating and our lungs breathing, so that we can live and work each day. It is God who gives each of us the ability to forgive, to love, to experience joy, and to be patient in difficult times.

Accomplishments are fleeting. Opinions are subject to change. The world's definitions are constantly being revised. But God's definitions do not change because God does not change. What he says about us has eternity written all over it. God says that if you believe in his Son, his name is indelibly stamped on your life—and nothing in this world can ever change that.

Jesus gave us his name

When Jesus gave us his name, he gave us his identity. The word *Christian* literally means “little Christ” or “one who is like Christ.” The word *Christian* refers to a person so Christlike that people think they are seeing Jesus himself. As Christians, our words and actions should mirror those of the Lord. Our way of life should embody what Jesus would do if he were walking in our world today.

Your supreme identity is all bound up in the word *Christian*. The world may know me as Michael, and it may know you as Jim or Joe or Jane or Jill, but that is not your true identity. You are a Christian. You bear the name of Christ. You represent Christ to the world. Above all else, that is who you truly are.

Jesus once told his followers, “If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it” (John 14:14). He gave his followers the authority to heal the sick and cast out demons in his name. He gave them the ability to solve problems and meet human needs in his name. Because Jesus has given us his name and his full identity, we have the power and authority to stand confidently in the midst of a fallen and sinful world and say, “I choose this day whom I will serve, and I choose to serve Jesus.”

As you go out into the world today—to your place of employment, your neighborhood, your place of ministry—you can say to yourself, “I am going out into the world in the name of Jesus. Everything I do, I do in the identity of Jesus. It is as if Jesus himself were wearing these clothes, walking in these shoes. I wear his name, and everything I do, I do in the name of Jesus.”

Then, everywhere you go throughout your day, walk in the identity of Jesus. Do what he would do, say what he would say. Be Jesus to everyone around you. You may be all they ever see or know of Jesus in the course of this day, so wear his name well.

The pagan world tried to change the names of Daniel, Haniah, Mishael, and Azariah to names that reflected the false gods of Babylon. But the pagan world could not change the true identities of these four heroic young men of Israel. God’s name was written in their hearts and on their lives. So God gave Daniel and his companions favor and success, even in the land of their captivity.