

A black and white close-up portrait of a man with a slight smile and a short beard. The text is overlaid on the image.

HELLO  
MY NAME IS

Discover Your True Identity

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## INTRODUCTION

# WHAT'S ON YOUR NAMETAG?

I like to run. Not long distances. This body wasn't built for marathons. And not every day. Bad for the joints. And not when it's too hot outside. Honestly, who wants to sweat that much? And don't get me started on the chafing. Oh, and I can't run in chilly weather either. Wouldn't want to catch a cold . . .

Come to think of it, I'm not sure I actually like running after all.

Perhaps it's just the *idea* of running that I am so fond of. When that one perfect day comes along (every six months or so), boy does it feel good to lace up the old sneakers and go out exploring! And that's what I love best about going for a jog. Running provides a rare opportunity to witness the world around me for at least a few minutes without being plugged in to some sort of mobile device that is competing for my attention. It never fails that as I run, somehow God seems to open my eyes and show me something new. That's what happened last weekend.

## INTRODUCTION

The stars aligned, and that perfect day to run had arrived. I was traveling through a new city and was excited to explore the area a bit. As I exited my hotel, I found a trail that ran along a river and decided *that* would be my path. I was not even ten minutes into my run when I passed a park bench occupied by a homeless man. It was clear that this uncomfortable-looking, metal-framed stopping post had served as his bed for the night, or at least for the last several hours. And although it was broad daylight, he was still passed out, showing no signs of waking. In the few seconds it took me to jog past him, I was struck by three distinct snapshots that I still can't get out of my head.

First, he had a young face. Although he had one arm covering his eyes to shield the sun, I could tell this man was probably in his early thirties, maybe around my age. Second, on his wrist I noticed a rubber bracelet with the words "Aim High" painted in white across it. But the most peculiar part of this heartbreaking picture was the book he clutched to his chest with his other arm the way a little child hugs her teddy bear while sleeping. Not wanting to stop and risk waking him, I continued running down the path, but all the while wondering what book he was clinging to so tightly as he slept.

Much to my appreciation, the trail came to an end about a mile down the river, and I had no choice but to head back the way I came and hopefully hang up my running shoes for another six months. As I ran back, I wondered if that guy on the bench would still be sleeping when I passed him again. My pace quickened as I thought of that book he was holding. Within

minutes, I saw that this young man had yet to move, but now I could make out some of the words on the cover as I passed by: “Class of 2001.” It was a high school yearbook.

I imagined that was his yearbook. I imagined it held inside a picture of a younger, more hopeful version of the man who was out cold on that park bench by the river. I imagined the inside cover was filled with messages from former friends exchanging best wishes on graduation day. Things like, “Hey, buddy! Have a great summer. Stay cool!” Or maybe a message from a girl he had a crush on that said, “Call me this summer,” along with her phone number inside the shape of a heart. I imagined pages featuring “Most Likely” awards, where he may have been voted “Most likely to succeed” or “Most likely to find a cure for cancer.” Ultimately, I imagined that maybe, just maybe, he was holding on to that book so he could remember a time filled with . . .

*More promise, less failure.*

*More good times, less mistakes.*

*More opportunities, less regrets.*

*More future, less past.*

Maybe you, too, are trying to remember a more promising time in your life. Maybe you are not sure you like where you’ve been or who you’ve become. Maybe you’re struggling to find your true identity or how exactly you fit into this crazy world. Maybe someone has made you believe a lie about who you are by speaking damaging words to you. Well, you’re not alone. Every single one of us has a difficult journey to discover our true, God-given identity. E. E. Cummings wrote,

## INTRODUCTION

To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you just like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.

### HELLO, MY NAME IS JORDAN

The story I received from a young man named Jordan so powerfully illustrated this “fight” for identity Mr. Cummings referenced that he inspired the song that, in turn, inspired this book you are holding. The very first sentence of Jordan’s letter to me read, “Hello, my name is Jordan and I’m a drug addict.” Jordan went on to tell me his story of growing up as a preacher’s kid in a small Tennessee town. He was always the “good” kid, never got into any trouble. Jordan was a gifted athlete. He could run. Fast. We’re talking Forrest Gump fast. He received an athletic scholarship and became a seven-time all-American in track and field. But during his sophomore season Jordan badly broke his ankle. That was when he received his first prescription for the pain medication OxyContin. Jordan said he felt like he’d lost his identity as the big man on campus and the star athlete, and he began to find his identity in that pain medication as addiction began to take over his life. After two failed drug tests, Jordan hit rock bottom. He was kicked out of college, stripped of his scholarship and his beloved sports. Because his parents begged him to get help and not let his addiction have the last say in his life, Jordan agreed to enter a yearlong Christian recovery program called Teen Challenge.

During his time in Teen Challenge, Jordan began to realize that all his life he had been seeking and finding his identity in the wrong things. Oh, they weren't all bad things on the surface. But that's just it, they were *on the surface*. "Preacher's son." "Good kid." "Star athlete." Jordan thought those titles defined him. It wasn't until bad choices were made and some of those identities he was so proud of were wiped away that he realized his true identity was waiting to be discovered *beneath* the surface. Now he was being tempted to try on some different names for size. Names like "Addict," "Failure," and "Regret."

But as Jordan spent his time in recovery praying and reading his Bible, God did a powerful work in his life. God began showing him that he isn't defined by his successes *or* his failures but that his true identity is found in the one who made him and loves him deeply. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17 NKJV). Someone once said, "Let your only evaluation of worth derive from the awareness of God's love for you. All other measures leave one in a state of delusion."

Jordan decided to embrace his new identity in Christ, and that was the key to the miraculous transformation in his life. He graduated from recovery after a year, but he knew that he had some more graduating to do. He went back to the same college that kicked him out and earned his master's degree! They even allowed him to run for the track and field team one more time. (I bet he could give me a few pointers on the whole running thing.) Today, Jordan is a high school teacher and

varsity basketball coach. God has blessed him with a beautiful wife and has radically restored Jordan's relationships with family and friends. The last sentence of the story Jordan wrote to me said, "I no longer introduce myself as an addict. Instead I can say, 'Hello, my name is Jordan and I am a child of the One True King!'"

## DISCOVERING WHO YOU ARE

You do have a nametag, you know. It is as if the doctor slapped a nametag right on the outside of your first onesie in the delivery room and, with a push out the door, shouted, "Welcome to the world, go make a name for yourself." Of course, we are each given a birth name, one decided on by our parents. And while that name may carry some meaning or family significance, that's not the name I'm talking about. No, we are thirsty for real meaning, waiting for something more. Our birth name does not hold the answer to the questions we ask ourselves, does not fill in the blank at the end of "Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_." From my earliest memories of childhood, I've been trying to fill in that blank, living as though it's up to me to tell the world I'm significant.

Throughout our lives, we all try on different nametags and identities, seeing what fits, what feels right, what seems to be accepted or liked by the people around us. We choose names that make us feel good, proud, distinguished. Unfortunately, some names find their way on our nametags as a result of failures and regrets. Still others are given to us by outside influences—names that hurt us and negatively affect our view of who we are. Over

time our nametags can get pretty crowded, and while some of the names on our nametags might be accurate in describing one facet or another of our lives, those names fail to capture our full identity. They may describe the outer layers, but they don't come close to the core of who we are. Those names may represent the bullet points, mere chapters of our lives, but they could never accurately title the story of our lives. The more we start to own or accept those names, the further we may find ourselves from our true identity.

Just as Satan deceived Adam and Eve in the garden, he would love for nothing more than to get you to believe lies about yourself. He knows that if you take ownership of a false identity, before long that identity will own *you*. And the more time you spend being owned by a false identity, the further away you fall from discovering and tapping into the power and the freedom and the hope found in the truth of who God says you are. That is the key: you can't discover who you are until you first acknowledge *whose* you are.

What if I told you it wasn't up to you to fill in that blank? What if I told you those negative identities that have landed on your nametags don't have to stay there? My prayer is that this book might serve as a wake-up call for you to take a good look at your nametag. This book will challenge you to get honest with yourself. Most of all, I pray you will be overwhelmed by the powerful promise that those old names don't have to own you anymore. After all, only God writes your name with permanent marker—all other names can be erased.

## INTRODUCTION

Just like Jordan, your true identity has already been given to you, and it's the only title that really matters. You are a CHILD OF THE ONE TRUE KING!

*See what great love the father has lavished on us,  
that we should be called children of God!  
And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)*

## CHAPTER 7

# A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

*It ain't what they call you, it's what you answer to.*

W. C. FIELDS

According to a recent article published by the American Psychological Association, titled “Mistaken Identity,” 305 people who were once wrongfully convicted of crimes in the past two decades have been set free thanks to DNA evidence (apa.org). An organization called the Innocence Project helped exonerate 170 of those people, all of whom spent years or even decades in prison before the truth was discovered. Try to imagine such a horribly sudden change of events taking place in someone’s life. One day you’re doing your thing, going to work, stopping at the grocery store, enjoying a meal with your family. And the next day you’re hearing the haunting crack of a judge’s gavel slamming down in a courtroom declaring you guilty of a crime you didn’t commit. William Dillon knows what that’s

like. Just days before he was supposed to try out as a pitcher for the Detroit Tigers in 1981, this future major leaguer was arrested on murder charges. He spent twenty-seven years behind bars until DNA evidence exonerated him and ultimately set him free. In his midfifties now, he missed his chance to see his baseball dream come true.

Now check out this statistic: approximately three-quarters of those wrongful convictions involved false eyewitness testimony. In other words, hundreds of people have been put behind bars simply because someone incorrectly identified them as the guilty criminal. They pinned it on the wrong person, and the wrong person wound up behind bars. In the legal system, an eyewitness's testimony and opinion carry weight. And if that eyewitness is wrong, it can unfairly seal an innocent person's undeserved fate for life.

But the dangers of mistaken identity extend far beyond the legal system and into the matters of the heart as well. Jennifer knows what it's like to be falsely identified. This is an excerpt from the letter she wrote to me about her mistaken identity:

Your parents are supposed to tell you how much they love you. I grew up with constant criticism: "You're ugly. You're stupid. You're worthless. You're not good enough for anything. You are useless." You can only hear things like that for so long before you start believing them . . . Even to this day, I struggle with thinking I am not good enough in any aspect of my life . . . The

tape in my mind keeps rewinding automatically and playing over and over again. I wish I could erase it.

These eyewitnesses in Jennifer's life, her parents, got it wrong. And the weight of their damaging words at such a young age threatened to sentence her to a life of emotional imprisonment. Her nametag had been filled in for her from the time she was a child. Those damaging words—*ugly, useless, stupid, worthless*—were hatefully scribbled in by people who failed to see her true identity, and for a long time that mistaken eyewitness testimony held her captive. "You can only hear things like that for so long before you start to believe them."

Even as I write this, a news story just popped up on my phone that is such a sad and vivid example of how damaging cases of mistaken identity can be. The parents of a four-year-old girl were arrested and brought into custody in Arkansas after social workers were made aware of and reported evidence of abuse taking place. When the child was rescued, police said she had been abused so badly that she had a black eye, dried blood in the corners of her mouth, and deep purple bruises all over her body. But it's what she said when a social worker asked her name that was truly startling. "Idiot," she whispered. Police say that she had been called "idiot" so often and for so long, that was the first word that sprung into her young mind. Mistaken identity. Because of her parents' evil actions and wounding words, a precious little girl thinks her name is actually "Idiot." She will undoubtedly have to spend years of her life

dealing with the psychological and emotional trauma caused by her parents.

Has your nametag ever been filled in with damaging words used by people to mistakenly identify you? Maybe you have been a victim of bullying at school, or found yourself repeatedly on the receiving end of hurtful and demeaning words spoken by a spouse. Perhaps you've been criticized by a coworker or insulted by a coach. Maybe Jennifer's story or that little girl's hit you hard because you, too, have been crushed by careless criticism of a parent or even abused at a young age. We love little clichés like, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," but at best, that little sentiment is wishful thinking. Damaging words do serious damage to the soul, no matter how young or old you are. What people say about you carries weight. Words change the way you see yourself when you look in the mirror. They alter the way you carry yourself when you go out in public. All it takes is one criticism, one cut down, or one time being the butt of everyone else's joke to steal your confidence and replace it with insecurity that will ruin your life if you let it.

The world goes out of its way to make you believe you are not good enough, pretty enough, skinny enough, smart enough, athletic enough, rich enough, popular enough, qualified enough. Just. Not. Enough. Behind every false eyewitness's damaging words is the same enemy whom the Bible describes as the father of lies (John 8:44). His goal is simple: to replay those words over and over in your mind until, ultimately, you give up hope that you could be anything other than what the world

has said about you. He will try to use the voices around you to drown out the still, small voice of the one who made you. Satan knows that if he can get you to believe a lie about who you are, then there's a good chance you'll never become who you were meant to be, who God created you to be.

### THE KING OF DAIRY QUEEN

If our hearts were gardens, I think we'd remember the first time certain seeds were planted there. Especially seeds of insecurity. I know mine remembers the moment the first seeds of insecurity were planted on impressionable soil. I remember the day I learned that my first name rhymed with another word that wasn't quite the flattering description a fourth-grade kid would want to be associated with. I heard a few of the kids at school intentionally inserting my name into that playground refrain. "Matt-Matt-bo-bat banana-fanna-fo-fat!" They knew what they were doing too. And they did it over and over. I got a new nametag that day, and I never looked in the mirror the same way again. My struggle with self-image continued and only increased as I made my way through junior high, high school, college, and even to this day.

I was overweight as a child, but I never really thought of it that way until those kids pointed it out the way only kids can do. I mean, I do recall wondering why all of my clothes throughout elementary school had a "Husky" tag inside. I played youth-league football and dreamed of being the quarterback or the running back—you know, one of the fun positions—but any kid over a certain weight had a black piece of tape put on the

back of his helmet, and they were relegated to the offensive line. No fun. Now, I don't want to blame my parents entirely for the fact that I struggled with my weight as a kid, but looking back, I do see some patterns that certainly did not help me to learn a healthy lifestyle. The main culprit keeping the baby fat attached to me was a magical place called Dairy Queen. Dilly Bars, Peanut Buster Parfaits, Blizzards. Uh, yes, yes, and YES! For some families, a place like DQ might only be designated for special occasions. But a typical Tuesday was special enough for my family to indulge in frozen treats. And to make matters worse, there was one located just a couple of miles from our little yellow house on Janes Avenue in Downers Grove, Illinois.

Now, my dad's idea of exercise when I was growing up was for us to take a bike ride. Yet, mysteriously, that bike ride would always seem to end at the same location: Dairy Queen. Whatever calories we burned off on the way were more than made up for as we polished off our ice cream. Then, after our tummies were full, we couldn't be expected to pedal all the way home. So we called my mom for a ride home. She would pick us up, we would throw our bikes in the backseat and lazily be driven back to the house. After all, I'm pretty sure you're supposed to wait *at least* thirty minutes after eating ice cream before getting on a bicycle, right? Or maybe that's swimming. Well, don't do that either.

It wasn't just the sweets that got me in trouble, though. I grew up in the generation that lived at the corner of Super-Size and Get-Your-Money's-Worth. All the fast food restaurants had begun offering the option to "super-size" your value meal. For

just a dollar more, you could upgrade to the ginormous cup of soda *and* extra-large order of salty French fries. And just in case you finished your barrel-sized drink, they were now also offering *free refills!* Now, this is where my dad comes in again. He always made sure we got the full “value” from every value meal. I remember one conversation with my dad at the end of a meal at McDonald’s.

Dad: Son, why don’t you go get a free refill before we leave?

Me: I’m not thirsty anymore.

Dad: But it’s *free*.

Me: Yeah, but I’m full. I don’t need any more.

Dad: Son, I don’t think you understand. It’s FREE. Why would you *not* get one?

Me: Okay Dad. I’ll fill it up.

Perhaps that was my dad’s way of sticking it to the man. Looking back, I wonder if he was trying to drink enough Diet Coke to make up for all the taxes he was paying Uncle Sam. We get a pretty good laugh about that now every time we find ourselves both standing at a fountain drink machine. And to this day, Dad always gets his free refill.

Early in my career, I was driving myself from small town to small town playing even smaller concerts. I remember being booked to play a show in a tiny Illinois town one summer. I arrived early to that one-stoplight town and happened to notice a Dairy Queen. So I pulled into the drive-through line. I heard a girl’s voice through the speaker, “Welcome to Dairy

Queen. May I take your order?” Why, yes, you can! I ordered a Butterfinger Blizzard (because that’s exactly what you need just before getting up on stage to sing). When I arrived at the pick-up window, the girl who had taken my order was blowing pink bubbles with her chewing gum as she took my money from my hand. She made eye contact with me, and then she looked over at something on the wall in the restaurant. Then she looked back at me again, and then back at the wall. Turns out, there was a poster with my picture on it, advertising my show that night. She blew another bubble and then asked, “That you on that poster?” Enjoying the fact that I had just been recognized, I smiled and said, “Yes. Yes, it is.” She blew another bubble and then said, “Huh. You look a lot chubbier in person,” just as she placed the large Blizzard in my hands. Stunned by both her comment and the irony of the moment as she was handing me a thousand calories of lactose, I handed the frozen goodness right back to her and said, “Thank you very much.” Then I drove off. And guess what was ringing in my ears all the way to the show? “MATT-MATT-BO-BAT BANANA-FANNA-FO-FAT.”

## HELLO, MY NAME IS “INSECURE”

If I’m being honest, I’ve felt this deep need for approval and affirmation for as long as I can remember. I wonder if that started back on the playground when my eyes were opened to see that from someone else’s opinion, that false eyewitness, I was in some way flawed. From my childhood to this very day, moments of insecurity have at times paralyzed me.

Why did I vote for myself for homecoming king? Why did it matter? Why did it feel so good to win? Why did I need the popularity? Why have I craved the applause of people all these years? Why am I writing this book? Why do I hope you like it? Why do I need you to like it? Why am I afraid you won't?

Sometimes insecurity will hit me just before I walk on stage for a concert. All of a sudden I will be convinced that I'm not wearing the right shirt. So I'll hurry and try on another. Then another, and another. By this point, I am feeling fully flustered and stressed out over a stupid shirt, my mind a million miles away from focusing on what matters—the chance to minister to people through song. My wife is usually with me on the tour bus before I walk on stage, and I thank God for her. I'll ask her over and over again, "Should I wear this? Or this? Or this?" Finally, she will calm me down and say, "Matthew, you look great. And those six shirts you just tried on are all the same color anyway. It doesn't matter."

Reading what I just wrote, I'm afraid you might be thinking, *Wow, this guy's got issues!* But I guess that's part of what this book is about, putting myself out there. Because here's the thing . . . As much as I hope you won't settle for the name "Insecure," I don't want to feel that insecurity anymore either. I don't want to let it maintain its grip on my mind. I don't want it to matter whether or not I receive a crowd's applause. I don't think God wants that for me either. In fact, I know that's not his will for me. "My dear friends, don't let public opinion influence how you live out our glorious, Christ-originated faith" (James 2:1 MSG).

## THE BIGGEST LIES

I want to write music, sing songs, write books, and live my life free from the opinions of other people once and for all. I love the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*. There is a conversation between the horse and the rabbit, two stuffed animals, about what it's like to be real. The horse is educating the rabbit, saying, "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." Oh, to be that kind of real, secure enough to ignore the false eyewitnesses who "don't understand." But how?

### OUR SPIRITUAL DNA

God offers us a way to fend off the firepower of the false eyewitnesses around us and inform Insecurity that it has spent its last day dominating our identities. "For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the *knowledge of God*, and we *take captive every thought* to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:3–5 NIV, emphasis mine). Knowledge is our weapon. But not just any knowledge. Our "knowledge of God" is what gives us the power to turn the tables and take captive every lie and every thought that tries to keep us locked up. There is power in knowing and believing who God is. And there is power in learning and receiving

who God says we are. I bet he knew we'd need more than one reminder.

*You are created in his image.* For starters, God your creator says he created you “in his own image” (Genesis 1:27 NIV).

*You belong.* “My dear children, you come from God and belong to God” (1 John 4:4 MSG).

*You are chosen as God's special possession.* “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession” (1 Peter 2:9 NIV).

*You are a masterpiece.* “For we are God's masterpiece” (Ephesians 2:10).

*You are his child.* “For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26).

I think it's safe to say you're kind of a big deal to God. He never once looks at you, his creation, with regret or with thoughts of what he would do differently if he could start you over again. You are who God says you are. Now, remember how I mentioned that 305 people who have been wrongfully convicted through our legal system have been set free? Remember what eventually exonerated them? DNA evidence. In crime investigations, DNA is as good as fact. DNA is proof. DNA replaces

hearsay with certainty. DNA trumps some eyewitnesses' pointing finger every time. And just as we each have a physical DNA, God's Word informs us of our spiritual DNA as well. DNA can be found in a fingerprint or even a strand of hair. So, who better to inform you of your spiritual DNA than the one who knows you "down to the last detail—even numbering the hairs on your head" (Matthew 10:30 MSG)? When we flood our hearts and minds daily with these reminders from Scripture of our spiritual DNA, we can ensure that the enemy's false eyewitness testimony has no power to keep us behind bars.

I love David's words in Psalm 139:14: "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well" (NIV). To know something "full well" means to know without a doubt. That's what knowledge of your spiritual DNA will do for you. It will remove all doubt that you are anything or anyone other than who God says you are. And in the absence of doubt, confidence grows. That's what has happened with my friend Jennifer, whose story I shared at the beginning of this chapter.

If her story sounded familiar, it's probably because you read it in a book I previously published. In that book on forgiveness, I wrote about how "Melissa" was learning to forgive those false eyewitnesses in her life who made her feel "ugly," "worthless," "stupid." Since she was still struggling with this part of her life, and her relationship with her family was strained, Jennifer didn't feel comfortable using her real name. She later reached out to me again, saying she had changed her mind. She wanted me to use her real name because it was time to step out from the shadows

of that low self-esteem once and for all, but by then it was too late—the book had already been printed and being shipped around the country.

I usually don't make a habit of telling the same story twice, but I thought I'd make an exception so that Jennifer could see her real name and because I believe it could help you begin to see yours.

Jennifer, wherever you are, I want you to know how proud I am of you for finding your real name. For daring to believe that those false eyewitnesses who hurt you do not get to decide your identity for you. You know you are so much more. You are a mother, a wife, a friend, and a chosen child of God. You have discovered your spiritual DNA, and you are no longer held captive by the mistaken identity that once imprisoned you. You've even inspired this singer, who's tired of trying on so many shirts, to tear up the nametag that says "Insecure" once and for all and to walk in the confidence that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Like you, I can finally say I know that "full well."

## THE BIGGEST LIES

When have you been labeled with a false name? How hard was it not to own it, or to get rid of it?

How does your “spiritual DNA” help you stop believing the lies about who you are and start believing the truth of who God says you are?

Read Psalm 139:14. What are the signs that you have been “fearfully and wonderfully made”? And how can you know “full well” his works are wonderful?