

Daniel in the Lion's Den - Monterey, CA
Maple Grove UMC
Doug Davis

Years ago, this happened . . .

It was a grey, breezy weekday afternoon in Monterey. I was walking swiftly on the boardwalk toward the hotel when I spotted him. He was in his late-20s to early 30s, powerfully built, with a youthful, light complexion. I guessed he was around 6 ft tall and 220 lbs. He wore ragged light blue jeans, a gray sweatshirt, and a faded army-green colored beanie over his shaven head. He held a cardboard sign, with a crisply written Homeless Vet in black Sharpie marker, neatly centered and legible from a distance. Besides the thin veneer of road residue, he projected a clean figure. He opened the discussion, "God Bless you, brother." "The same to you. What's your name?" "Daniel, he says."

Something in me sensed that I needed to document this conversation. I asked Daniel if I could record him. I'd never done this before. He agreed, "that's cool, that's cool." He served in the Iraq War as an MP, with two tours in 2003 and 2005. The second tour was especially rough, when he worked at the Lion's Den Patrol Base. "Daniel in the Lion's Den." He grinned, not elaborating further. On his return stateside after the war, he was entangled in trouble. He had bad PTSD. Nightmares. He got into drugs. He went AWOL from the military and was discharged.

Later, he got into a physical fight with his dad and left his home in Utah. Later still, he assaulted a cop and was sent to jail for 9 months. When he got out, he had nowhere to go. He headed for San Francisco and started panhandling for drugs--eventually developing a crystal meth habit that grew to \$100/day. And then, extraordinary things began happening to him. One day he was in Panhandle Park in San Francisco, sitting on a bench. He carried a pocket Bible with him to read and as he put it, "try and figure things out." He was reading the Psalms and said he could relate to everything David was saying, especially those about his enemies coming at him.

Hearing this, I became intensely interested. I asked Daniel if he knew about Psalm 140, the Psalm read to St. Francis upon his death. Daniel had heard of it and recited a portion of it to me from memory. Psalm 140 begins like this 1:2 "Rescue me, O' Lord, from evil men protect me from men of violence who

devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day.” “And in verse 6 O' Lord, I say to you, You are my God. Hear, O Lord, my cry for mercy.” He continues the story. . .While on the park bench reading, Daniel skipped to Ephesians 6. There, he became entranced by the words 'shield of faith' in verse 16. "I wasn't high at that time," he said. Contemplating 'shield of faith,' he put down the book, looked up, and saw a man, neatly dressed in a black three-piece suit, complete with top hat and cane. This man looked straight at him, and Daniel felt what he described as "pure evil, a demonic presence." In terror, he bolted out of the park and went by the ocean to calm down.

Later that evening, outside of Bill Graham Civic Auditorium, he began looking for food. While doing so, he was approached by a church group who asked him if they could pray for him. He told them 'yes,' and they formed a circle around him. "There were seven of them," he remembers. At the same time, another group approached him from the outside of the prayer circle. They began shouting and cursing at him. They were strangers and were saying things to him that were very personal. "They could not have known these things unless they knew me," recalled Daniel, "things like 'even though you're a veteran it doesn't matter and other crazy things. . .' I was flipping out, bro."

One of the seven, the pastor, asked Daniel if he could take him home. He took him up on it and hopped into his truck. "I just wanted a way out." The pastor asked him to wait in the truck while he went back out for a minute to give direction to the group. While sitting in the truck, he saw the man in the black suit and top hat again. This time the man approached him, growling at him like he was going to kill him. Daniel recalls, "The only thing I could think to do at the time was to tuck my head between my knees and scream JESUS!" The man stopped approaching him further, watching him from a playground nearby.

The pastor climbed back in the truck, and they drove off. At this point, he said, "my life changed." The breakthrough came when they got to the pastor's house. He recalled: "I remember a ball of something leaving my body. I remember weeping continuously for 3 hours. I recounted all the bad things I had done in my life, how wretched I was and how sorry I was for everything. "It was then I saw my need for a savior. I saw my need for Jesus Christ."

I was spellbound, frozen taken over by his words, and the vivid memory of a time not so long before, when a 'ball of something' left my body, out of the top of my head, soon after I had angrily challenged God to produce a lightning bulb

and take me the f--- out of here. And then, the wretched feeling, the weeping and gnashing of teeth . . . Was I in a dream?

He recounts more details of his journey, citing numerous scriptures along the way, demonstrating how his life was playing out in their words. Over time, he joined a mission group and earned himself a place to stay. "But for the last 3 weeks, Daniel continued, all I heard God say was 'Go to Monterey, Go to Monterey.' Now I don't have any money, bro, and I told God, 'OK if I go, you're going to have to provide for me.' But of course, he already knows." He related it back to Peter. "You've got to step out of the boat sometimes. Quit focusing on the storms and focus on Jesus. People I was with at the time, said 'This isn't smart. You'll go back to being homeless.'"

Daniel spoke of how the apostles were often homeless until they were killed. He was good with this. "Paul was always content. He was content when homeless. He was content when in jail." And yes, the Son of Man had no place even to rest his head . . . With no money, relying on his shield of faith, Daniel set out for Monterey. First, there was a train ticket left at the counter with 3 hours left on it. This got him to the bus station. There he met a woman at the Bus Depot that couldn't help him but, she had a sister that loved to help those in need. She funded the \$190 bus ticket. He made it to Monterey earlier that day.

I asked if he still had anger issues. "Yes," he said, "but it's getting better." He called it his Giant that he has to battle and that "Everyone has their Giant." "The old ways still come out of me. I've found you have to let Jesus be Lord of your life, not just your savior." Daniel asked what it was that God was asking me to do. I told him I wasn't sure. Maybe it was what I was doing at that moment. Talking to him and recording his story. And then he said, "You gotta let me give you something before you go. It is about finding your identity in Christ." He pulls out a green-covered journal. "You can have the whole book." At first, I refused the offer, but Daniel insisted. "God has provided for me so much; it's ridiculous. I have other books. I am being led to give this to you."

The book has Bible passages written out and passages in his words written underneath and highlighted red to symbolize "the blood of Christ." Like this (hold up the notebook.)

A sample . . . Romans 8:1 - There is, therefore, no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Daniel - "No condemnation awaits me." Colossians 2:10 - and you are

complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power. “I am complete in Christ.” I dropped into the dreamlike feeling again. “Am I really hearing this?” Only weeks before, I received instruction from an unusual source to verify words that I had written with scripture. This was the mirror opposite of Daniel’s method. And I hadn’t completed this work yet.

We talked some more, but soon it was time to part. Before parting, we prayed together, our hands placed on each other’s shoulders (like this). I prayed for God to work through him to dissolve his anger, telling him that I was sure it would happen because it had already happened. God is not bound by our illusions of time. In return, Daniel gives me the most meaningful personal prayer I have ever received from anyone. Not because of the words. Rather, it was pure feeling, an energetic movement is the best I could describe it. It was literally power-ful and left me with a lightness or floating sensation that persisted for some time.

A few days later . . . I am back home in my own bed and bolted awake out of a tragic and vivid nightmare, high-definition color and senses intact. It was the worst of a string of such dream, always ending at precisely 3 a.m. I had already become fearful of sleep. But this time I awoke to 3 orbs of light darting across my vision, vanishing soon after. Terrified, with waves of cold chills rolling over me, I jump out of bed, run to the living room. Seeking words of solace, I grab the Bible and open it. Unmarked and unleafed, with hundreds of options to choose from, the Bible chooses page 489, the page starting with Psalm 140.

And I read it . . . Hear, O Lord, my cry for mercy. And I think of David, battling his Giants . . . And I think of Daniel, battling his Lions. . . Clutching his shield of faith . . . And I see him smiling, contented. . . And I think of St. Francis and our 'Brother Sun', soon to rise again in the east . . . And I know I the night will end. And the Light will overcome. .

My Observations/Lessons Learned: #1 - This started with a church group going into the field to pray for a homeless drug addict who was himself open and receptive to prayers. Both the transmitter and receiver were in tune here to deliver God’s power and He delivered it. #2 - I passed maybe a dozen homeless people that day without a second glance. The smile drew me in to Daniel. This reminds me I need to smile more. As one great spiritual teacher once said, “Become a smile millionaire.”

Like most, I still battle with anger on occasion. I am fully aware it is our own bad medicine, but it is not always so easy to let go of it. My experience tells me that it takes conscious, sustained effort to purge anger at the level of thought before it manifests into words or negative actions. And the deeper the cut, the longer it takes. Even when you think you've purged angry thoughts, they seem to want to drift back into the mind. To transform anger into love is a trick I haven't learned yet. My memory of Daniel gives me the courage. If he can do it, maybe I can do it too.

In closing, I wonder if I could pray for you and you could pray for me, and we could all pray for each other to let go of any anger or resentment we might be holding as we kick off 2022.

Dear Heavenly Father, Divine Mother, Source of our Being, God

We pray for Your healing power to root out our seeds of anger, and quench them in the Holy fire, and to forgive those for whom we are holding our feelings of resentment. O' Lord we thank You for doing this for us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!