

SHADOW
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CHRISTIANS

MAKING
AN IMPACT
WHEN NO ONE
KNOWS
YOUR NAME

JEFF TORO
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With Appreciation For

Eric Espinoza,

the shadow Christian
who worked tirelessly and persistently
to make this book a reality.

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CHAPTER 1

LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

Names matter.

Expectant parents spend hours poring over baby name books, trying to find just the right name for a child on the way. Many cultures attach meaning to a child's name, hoping the name will motivate the child to develop certain character qualities or live up to family expectations. Some people have family names they pass on to their children, creating "Juniors" and "Treys," perpetuating family lineage and tradition. Teenage girls still scrawl their first name with their boyfriend's last name, trying a new identity on for size and fantasizing what married life might be like. And some women prefer keeping their own name or hyphenating both names. Either choice underscores the point—names matter.

Our culture values big names. We encourage people to make a name for themselves or get their name up in lights. When we are planning a major event, we try to

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get a celebrity on the program—a big-name entertainer, athlete, politician, or other well-known figure to boost attendance. Some people are so well-known they go by only one name—Bach and Mozart, Madonna and Bono, Tiger and Serena. Groupies even take on the name of their icons—Taylor has her Swifties and the Grateful Dead their Dead Heads.

Most of us want our name spelled and pronounced correctly. This has been a challenge for me over the years, since Iorg is not a common name. The uniqueness of my name makes it special to me, even though it's almost always mispronounced and variant spellings make checking into hotels an adventure. Over the years, I have been Mr. Lorg or Mr. Torg or Mr. Long or Mr. Tong about as often as Mr. Iorg. Just to set the record straight, my last name is I-O-R-G. It's pronounced like *forge* without the letter *f*.

Our name originated in 1857 at Ellis Island, New York. The oldest instance of our name in print is on the manifest for a ship called the *Bazaar* (not the *Bizarre*, which given some of our family history might have been more appropriate). The European heritage and spelling of our name has been lost. Our family genealogists, along with professionals in the field, have turned over every imaginable rock trying to unearth the history of our name—to no avail. When Iorg was entered into the ship's logbook, the Iorg family name was born. Whoever he was and wherever he came from, he established a new identity

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and family tree. And we have been dealing with the name consequences ever since.

Names matter because they communicate identity. They are how we differentiate people. They are a part of what makes a person unique. Underscoring this, some people come up with unusual names or unusual spellings of common names to create distinction. Christy becomes Christi, Kristi, Krysti, or Chrysty. We use the concept of naming to give a compliment (she made a name for herself) and point out shortcomings (he's a friend in name only). Names communicate who we are, positively and negatively.

Names are how we record history and mark historical eras. Global history revolves around names like Augustine, Attila, and Mandela. Religious figures like Jesus and Mohammed mark movements, while other leaders lend their name to religions like Buddhism. In American history, Washington, Jefferson, and Adams are towering names among the founding fathers. Lincoln and the Roosevelts are named on any list of greatest American presidents. Reagan and Obama are iconic names in recent history, representing modern golden eras for their respective political parties. Negative examples also become names to avoid—no one names their child Hitler, Judas, or Nero.

Names are also consequential in biblical history. Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Isaiah, and Elijah are major characters in the Old Testament. Dozens of

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characters are named in the New Testament as well. Some are major players—like Peter, Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (named in many stories and named as authors of the bulk of the New Testament). There are also countless minor characters—from Alexander to Zacchaeus. By one count, 170 people are named in the New Testament. Clearly, many biblical characters were well-known enough to be named—for one reason or another—in the biblical record. Following their example, celebrating their accomplishments, and learning from their mistakes are important ways to grow spiritually.

In all these ways and more, names matter.

Until they don't.

Why the Omissions?

A few years ago, the story of some anonymous New Testament-era preachers caught my attention. Their riveting story became an important part of my story (more about that in chapter 10). Broader than what they accomplished, however, studying them led to several compelling questions: *Why are some biblical characters named and others not named? Why did Jesus call some people by name and leave others in anonymity? Why are some people singled out, by name, for relatively inconsequential contributions, while others, not named, did things that changed the world? Why do some people get their name in the paper while others are left out?*

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Back when dinosaurs roamed the earth, something called a newspaper was tossed on your front porch every morning. Publishers used ink and paper to produce the best news source available. That's how information was stored and shared before the digital revolution put this book on your phone or e-reader.

Particularly in small-town papers that focused on local news, getting your name in the paper was a big deal. From football stars to science-fair winners, debutantes to socialites, and even people being promoted at work—getting your name in the paper was an honor. It meant community recognition, personal achievement, and a permanent record of your success. My youth baseball experiences, particularly one glorious summer of winning a series of all-star tournaments, were chronicled by our local newspaper. Those clippings are still in a scrapbook in my garage almost fifty years later. Getting my name in the paper was a big deal.

In a far more significant way, some names are recorded in the Bible. Those names are printed on vastly more important paper. Their stories chronicle the contributions specific individuals made to the progress of God's kingdom. Their names are associated with miraculous exploits and colossal failures. They are superstars and villains whose actions have been memorialized for centuries. Since the Bible is an inspired book, inclusion of these names is significant. Following the same reasoning, the omission of names from important stories must also be

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significant. That leads to the seminal question that motivated me to write this book:

*Why were some biblical characters unnamed,
and what can we learn from their stories?*

And growing out of that question, even more importantly:

How can Christians who serve in the shadows today make a significant impact?

Significance in the Shadows

Shadow Christians are people who work in dimly lit margins, in the shadows created by the spotlight shining on others. They are believers who serve quietly, often anonymously, doing the work that keeps churches, organizations, families, and communities functioning. Shadow Christians make an impact even when no one knows their names. They care for children, sponsor student events, drive elderly friends to medical appointments, prepare meals others enjoy, give money to sustain ministries, set up for meetings, and change diapers (for the very young and the very old). They take on service roles, often several levels down the organizational chart, that help churches and ministries accomplish their mission. Their service makes more visible leaders successful.

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Shadow Christians are the unseen army—millions strong—who take their faith seriously, see themselves as role players in God’s grand plan, and seldom give any thought to being recognized for their service.

My study of characters in the biblical shadows, unnamed but incredibly significant, led me to two important conclusions:

God chooses and uses shadow Christians.

He relates to them intimately and tenderly, places high value on their anonymous contributions, and uses them as his essential workforce to accomplish amazing things. The answers to the questions above, along with these conclusions, leads to another more personal conclusion:

You matter.

**Shadow Christians
are people who
work in dimly lit
margins, in the
shadows created by
the spotlight shining
on others.**

Celebrating Your Role

You are likely a shadow Christian. You don’t have thousands of social media followers, have never spoken at a conference, and have never been asked to share your opinion on public issues. You serve in anonymity, and because of that, you may feel what you do is insignificant.

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You wonder whether what you do, even in ministry for God, really matters to him or makes any difference. Those doubts are baseless. You are as vital to your family, church, and community as the unnamed people in the Bible were to God's plans in their era.

You may also suffer from a spiritual inferiority complex. Since you aren't well-known and don't consider yourself particularly talented, you may wonder why (or even if) God wants to have a personal relationship with you. Given the global fascination with celebrities, it's easy to believe popularity equals significance. That's the way the world system functions but not God's kingdom. God relates to people without regard to popular (and often misguided) evaluations of their loveliness, desirability, or talents. God values people by a different set of standards.

If you struggle with these perspectives, keep reading to discover biblical predecessors who made an impact even though their names were left out of the story. Their examples (limited to New Testament characters to keep the book a manageable length) will reveal and reinforce the conclusions already mentioned: God chooses and uses shadow Christians. Those themes form the two parts of this book. In part one, you will discover how God relates to shadow Christians. We will clarify how God relates to you intimately and loves you tenderly before considering theological themes revealing how much God values what happens in the shadows.

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In part two, you will discover how God uses shadow Christians to accomplish his work. You will learn how important you are to advancing God's kingdom, even if no one knows your name.

Whether you are a shadow Christian or a person with a higher profile supported by a shadow team, you are about to discover this profound reality: God uses anonymous people to do amazing things for him—outside the spotlight, without fanfare or accolades.

God chooses people like you to fulfill his mission.

**God chooses
and uses shadow
Christians.**

Group Discussion

1. Does anyone in your group have an unusual name or an unusual story associated with their name? If so, ask them to tell their story.
2. Has anyone in your group ever had their “name in the paper” or otherwise publicized in a significant way (not counting self-generated social media)? If so, ask them to tell their story.
3. Since the Bible is inspired, what it includes and excludes are both important. Why do you think the accomplishments of some people are included in the Bible, but their names are omitted? Discuss insights with your small group.
4. Do you have a favorite anonymous person in the Bible? What did they do? Why does their story resonate with you? Share your insights and discuss them with your group.
5. How does this book define a shadow Christian? What questions about shadow Christians do you hope this study will answer? List those questions, discuss them with your group, and agree to work together to search for answers.
6. Who is a shadow Christian who has impacted your life in a positive way? What did you learn from them? What

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can you learn from their example of serving in the shadows? Share these stories with your group.

7. As you begin this study, what are some issues you need to resolve to enhance your role as a shadow Christian? Share these concerns with your group, and ask God for insight and growth over the next few weeks.

8. As you prepare to read the next chapter, how does knowing Jesus define your identity and give you purpose? Have you lost a sense of wonder in knowing Jesus personally? Are you comfortable using “intimacy” to describe your relationship with God? Why or why not? Discuss your answers with your group.

Shadow Christians are people who work in the margins, in the shadows created by the spotlight shining on others. We often think they—we—are insignificant. But here's the good news: God chooses and uses shadow Christians, and he wants to use you to make a difference.

There are some names in the Bible that everyone knows, but it is also full of stories with unnamed characters—people who made a difference, not in the spotlight, but in the shadows.

JEFF IORG is president of Gateway Seminary, a learning network with five campuses and a robust distance learning program. He speaks frequently on leadership and pastoral ministry issues in conferences and classroom settings. Iorg maintains a leadership website at www.jeffiorg.com, is featured on the Lead On! podcast, and has written or edited several other books. He and his wife, Ann, live in Ontario, California.

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