



# REDEFINING NORMAL

CHALLENGING THE NORM

a fresh look  
at being christian

# what is normal?

I have always loved summer. I think I love summer so much because so many of the things I enjoy happen in that time. School's out; ice cream is in. The days are long; bedtimes are later; curfews are extended. Life is sweet. But of all the things that summer brings, the one thing I looked forward to most as a child was spending my days at the pool. Kids by the thousands flock to swimming pools all over America like ants to a picnic. Some go to the pool to get a tan. Some show up at the pool to wrestle and play games in the shallow end. But more than anything else, the center of attention at the pool is the diving board.

Sadly, in our safety-first, lawsuit-driven world, fewer and fewer pools are willing to accept the liability of having diving boards. But in the special places that still have these pillars of fun, the ultimate is the high dive. Waiting to jump off the high dive is like waiting to go on a ride at Walt Disney World. The line stretches as far as the eye can see. The wait seems to take forever, but the magnetic pull of the rush you get when you jump from ten feet high is worth the wait. The high dive is the place where heroes are born and legends are made, the place where dreams are won and lost.

Once you stand on the high dive, you see what all the commotion is about. Ten feet doesn't seem that high from the ground when you're looking up. But from the top of the board, those ten feet seem to go on forever. When you reach the top, you realize the impact that could happen when you jump off—and then you have a choice to make. If you're a guy who carries a few extra pounds and is bigger than everyone else, you can go for the big splash. A good "cannonball," "can opener," or "preacher's seat" will send the whole pool into a fury. Others, however choose more death-defying options. These are the ones who have trained all year for just this moment. The hours spent practicing suddenly seem worthwhile as they leave the audience stunned with perfect back dives, "gainers" and the king of them all, the "one-and-a-half."

Still, there is another option. This option is one few choose but many stumble into unwillingly. This is, of course, the "belly flop." Most of the time this happens when someone attempts to stun the pool with a courageous

dive only to rotate too far or too little and smack the water in a way to which everyone at the pool gasps in unison, “OOOOOH.” A few oddballs will even pursue this option just to get such a response.

The older we get, the fewer options there are at the top of the high dive. It’s one thing for a kid to smack the water, but when an adult does so, head trauma often results. Gone are the days of reckless abandon. The possibility of painful welts, bloodshot eyes, and a frightening lack of feeling are enough to take the recklessness of childhood away—at least until someone levels a double-dog dare. Not too long ago, this scenario played out with my friends and me. We dared each other to attempt the prized “one-and-a-half,” which none of us had tried since the days of our youth. So we daredevils trudged (albeit hesitantly) to the high dive, promising to fling our bodies toward the water if the rest of the group promised to do the same.

This time, instead of getting encouragement from the rest of the pool-goers, our wives stood in the shallow end, begging and pleading for us to regain some semblance of sanity and chicken out of this stunt. But not wanting to be told what to do, we went to the high board one at a time. The first guy nailed the “one-and-a-half,” leaving everyone mesmerized by his courage. (Can I tell you that I was this brave soul?) The second guy, full of passion, miscalculated his jump and smacked the water. That made the threat of pain all the more real to everyone watching. Then the third guy made his way to the top of the board. He tried to talk himself into doing what he had promised to do. He had seen one guy nail the “one-and-a-half” and bask in all the glory. He had seen the other poor soul smack the water with a body-jarring, mind-numbing “THWHACK!” and come up violently gasping for air. The third guy wanted to risk everything and outdo the first two contestants; yet, something held him back. He was so afraid of messing up that, when he finally got the courage to jump, instead of flipping, he turned into a pencil and went feet-first into the water. Of course, this moron was showered with a chorus of boos by the same wives who earlier were pleading with their husbands to temper their testosterone levels and abort this dangerous stunt. His own wife led this cacophony of critics by calling him a chicken. So, this glutton for punishment stepped back up on the high dive, only to remain frozen again. He just couldn’t seem to talk himself into the risk.

Many of us stand in a similar position in our Christian lives. We are so afraid of messing up that we are convinced God’s great goal for our lives is for us to just say “No” to everything. We believe the only thing God is interested in is

"pencil dives" and that a good Christian is one who doesn't do anything to make waves.

The question of *Redefining Normal* is whether this just-say-no society we have created is the same movement that Jesus had in mind when he came to earth. Is Christianity only about setting moral boundaries, or could purity far outweigh those boundaries?

Read Luke 4:14-21

- In your own words, write Jesus' mission as stated in verses 18-19.
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- Which does Jesus' mission sound more like?

- the "pencil" dive
- the "one-and-a-half" dive

- Which of the following words would you use to describe Jesus' purpose statement in these verses?

- safety
- change
- the status quo

Jesus shows us that Christianity is more about saying, "Yes," than it is about saying, "No." It is more about risk than safety, more about change than the status quo. The change Jesus longs to trigger in our lives is nothing less than revolutionary. This book is a journey toward a revolution of the soul. Today, we start the path to waking up to life as God intends it. If we will be willing to take risks over the next eight weeks, we will find that God has more in mind for us than lame pencil dives.

## prayer exercise:

Take some time to write a description of what you think a mature Christian looks like. After you have written your description in the space below, ask God to help you in your understanding, to encourage you in the places you are right and to correct you in places where you are still learning. (We all have areas in our lives where we are still learning.) Then ask God to use this study to help you see the kind of life he intends for you to have.

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# the story

## part one: beauty

As we journey toward life as God intends it, we must begin by understanding our story as Christians. We can only embrace what we recognize. So over the next few days, we will spend some time becoming more familiar with God's redemptive story. The four words we will use as mileposts for this story are beauty, broken, baptism, and blessing. Today we begin the story by looking at beauty.

Read Genesis 1-2

- What thoughts strike you most as you read these chapters?

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- How did God evaluate the world he made?

- very bad
- bad
- OK
- good
- very good

■ What does God's evaluation of the world at creation tell you about the world we live in today?

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■ How would you describe the role of man and woman in the Garden of Eden?

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I am not an artist, but I appreciate those who are. My home is filled with pottery and paintings my wife has made. While she always blushes in embarrassment when I mention her work to people who visit our house, our home is much better off because of her artistic nature. If decorating were up to my artistic ability, the paintings on our walls would be nothing but stick figures.

Most artists I know are pretty bashful about their work. Something must truly be good to get their seal of approval. Much of the time they feel as though even their greatest works are still to some degree incomplete. But imagine an artist emerging from her studio with a piece of art that was not only so complete that any addition would diminish it but also was the favorite piece she had ever created. Picture the spark of electricity coming from her eyes every time it was displayed. The pride and sense of accomplishment that piece embodied would be the way the artist would want to be remembered forever.

While God is certainly more than a good artist, I think we walk away from Genesis 1 and 2 with a thought similar to the illustration above. God values

his work of creation as very good. It is his masterpiece. It is the work that declares who he is, a work to which he is heavily attached. The word **beauty** seems like an understatement when we look at God's world as he created it. Even after all this time, whenever we watch a sunrise or sunset, gaze at the stars at night, climb up a mountain and catch a glimpse of its majesty, see a humpback whale come up for air, or watch a tree blossom in the first days of spring, we stand amazed at the beauty of God's world.

So what is our role? In the Garden of Eden, the first man and woman were what we could call stewards of beauty. God discharged his authority to Adam and Eve in much the same way that an employer discharges authority to his apprentice or assistant. God created the world—and man and woman—in the image of God. Adam and Eve were appointed the vice presidents of operations. Their days were filled with work and purpose. Their walks with God in the cool of the day functioned as board meetings. Life was good. This is life as God intended it.

### prayer exercise:

Plan to take some time during the next twenty-four hours to watch a sunrise or sunset. Settle in during this time. Watch the sun dip below or rise above the horizon and bask in the afterglow or early flashes of light that appear even when the sun is nowhere to be seen. Let the glow of light minister to you as you remember how, in much the same way, we live in the afterglow of creation. Marvel at the beauty that is around you today.

# the story

## part two: broken

Romans  
1: 18-32

I have what you might call a spilling issue. For as long as I can remember, I have dropped food, spilled drinks, and knocked over fragile items. It's not that I want to spill, but maybe because of my tendency to overlook details, spilling just seems to come naturally to me. In fact, just a few days before I sat down to write this devotion, I did it again. After a hard day of working in the yard digging holes and planting bushes, I settled down on the couch to watch a little college football. I assured my wife that, as a grown-up, I could handle eating my dinner away from the kitchen table. I had been to a Sonic™ drive-in to pick up a hamburger, some jalapeño poppers and a big soft drink. This soft drink wasn't a medium, large, or even extra large size. It was the size they had to come up with a new name for—the "Route 44."® But just minutes after I sat down to eat, my Route 44® drink was all over the living-room carpet. In one of those moments that seem to happen in slow motion, I picked up the cup from the top only to feel it break and slip away. I dove to catch it and prevent the spill, but it was no use. Soda and ice were everywhere.

It would be one thing if this were the only time something like this had happened to me. But whether it was a cup, my mom's Precious Moments™ figurines or my wife's pottery, it seems as though I can't go anywhere without breaking something. Every time it happens, I confidently think I will never do it again. But before I know it, I find myself on the floor trying to clean up another mess I've created.

- What is the biggest spill you can remember causing?

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■ How did you feel when the spill happened? (Check all that apply)

horrible

guilty

anxious

foolish

clumsy

childlike

sorry

exposed

Read Romans 1:18-32

■ Using twelve words or less, put Paul's thoughts from this passage in your own words.

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When the apostle Paul looked around at the world and people in it, he saw more than beauty. The word **broken** can't fully describe what Paul saw, but it begins to paint the picture. Paul saw creation, but he also saw sin, depravity, and, to put it mildly, people living second-rate lives. The fingerprints of Romans 1 can be traced back to Genesis 3. In the biggest spill of all time, Adam and Eve ate of the one tree (the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) from which God told them not to eat. Needless to say, we human beings have been in a downward spiral ever since. Just as I have broken cups, ceramic figurines, and countless plates, the sin of Adam and Eve shattered God's beautiful creation. The pieces left scattered on the ground now tell two stories, one of beauty and one of brokenness.

It would be one thing if the Fall ended in the Garden of Eden. But day after day, the fall continues in our own lives. The broken pieces continue to be broken into even smaller pieces. Though the Bible primarily conveys a story of hope, its pages also feature many broken lives. From Cain to the people of Noah's time, from Noah himself to the construction of the Tower of Babel, and on and on, a story of brokenness continues, stretching even into today. Now, it seems as though brokenness rules the day. We need only read a newspaper, watch the news, or open our eyes to the world around us to see the things we have broken and the broken lives sin has caused us to live.

From terrorism, to global warming, to divorce, it seems at times as though the world is spinning out of control.

Adam and Eve responded to their spill in much the same way we often respond to our spills. They hid, ashamed of their sin, their nakedness and their destruction of God's good creation. When God came calling, their fear, anxiety and feelings of foolishness took them into the shadows. The shadows continue today as well. All over the world, people are hiding from God. We may not call it hiding. We may say we are seeking our own way or doing our own thing or living life to the fullest. But in the end, we are left alone, staring in the mirror face-to-face with the ramifications of the second-rate lives we are living.

### prayer exercise:

Use the space below to write down some of the spiritual spills you have made in your life. Take some time today to evaluate the brokenness those spills have brought to your life and the lives of those around you. Then spend some time watching the news on TV, looking for stories of brokenness. Ask God to help you have a realistic view of the brokenness around you.

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# the story

## part three: baptism

The stories of beauty and brokenness are all around us. Often, the seeming contradiction between the two has left us to wonder what purpose and meaning life has. For centuries, philosophers, poets, and spiritual leaders have tried to make sense of a world where beauty and brokenness co-exist. Christianity is not immune to this problem. In fact, Christianity's honesty about the stories of beauty and brokenness can make it appealing to seekers of truth. God created the world as good; that is why we see beauty. Man and woman walked away from God in sin; that is why we see brokenness. Although we understand this story, we still wonder, "What now?" No reasonable discussion of why beauty and brokenness exist will solve the longings in our heart. There remains deep inside of all of us the cry to find our way home, back to the beauty of the Garden.

**Baptism** is the word that illustrates this journey back to the Garden. The type of baptism we're discussing today is figurative in nature. We will not discuss the act of being immersed or sprinkled in front of a church. Instead, we're using a more generic definition of baptism to paint a picture of life through death. Baptism celebrates the possibility of change. Brokenness need not be the end or overarching characteristic of our lives, because, although we are fallen and shattered, God has picked up the pieces.

### Read Psalm 40

- What word best describes David in this passage?
  - helpless
  - numb
  - prideful
  - powerful

■ What word best describes God in this passage?

- removed
- distant
- apathetic
- deliverer

■ Put Psalm 40 in your words in twelve words or less.

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If you have ever broken a bone, you know the pain of brokenness. As an eighth grader, I broke my collarbone playing basketball. I remember the utter sense of helplessness I felt as I laid on the gym floor. I had taken hits before. Each time, I had been able to get back up. But this time, my body wouldn't move. I could not fix myself. I needed a doctor. I was broken.

Sin has left us in a similar predicament. We are sinners, not just because Adam and Eve sinned but because we sin as well. As sinners, we are left broken spiritually with no one to blame but ourselves. In need of the Great Physician, we can only wait for the stretcher and the ambulance and hope that he will be able to reset the broken pieces and heal us.

The good news of the Bible is that God is not removed, distant or uncaring. He has moved for us in the middle of our brokenness. God has picked up the pieces, first by creating a chosen people through Abraham and then by sending his only son, Jesus, through this people to deliver us from brokenness. We learned in the first day of the study that change was Jesus' mission statement. The story of the New Testament is that Jesus has stepped into our world and proclaimed, "Let all the broken pieces come to me. I will put you back together." Then he died, taking our brokenness upon himself. Three days later, he was resurrected from the dead, conquering brokenness for us. Now we, too, can enter into his resurrection when we come to the end of ourselves, ask for help and place our faith in him. Baptism is the word picture that describes this monumental resetting of the broken pieces of our lives. While this will hurt, and it may take some time for us to function normally, God's work of restoration is released in us at the moment of salvation.

## prayer exercise:

Psalm 40 is David's cry in the midst of his desperation. He sensed God's deliverance in the past and here cried out for God to continue his work of deliverance. Use your prayer time today to cry out to God for deliverance as well. If you have come to God through salvation, thank him for that. If you have not, take some time now to offer your life up to Jesus and ask him to deliver you from your sin. Spend the rest of your prayer time reflecting on the ways he has delivered you from brokenness. You may want to play a worship CD to help you meditate on this life-altering truth.

# the story

## part four: blessing

Genesis  
12:1-4

Over the past century, there may not be a city in the world that has been more marked by world events than Berlin, Germany. Berlin was a primary player in two World Wars, and the city carries the scars to prove it. At the end of World War II, the city was in ruins. Then the city was divided in half. For more than forty years, the Communist bloc controlled East Berlin, and the Western world controlled West Berlin. A twelve-foot wall ran through the city and separated the two sides. The Berlin Wall was a stark reminder of the Cold War and the tension between the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A. The architecture on both sides of the wall highlighted the differences as well. West Berlin modeled itself after Los Angeles, while East Berlin modeled itself after Moscow. Tension grew as the world's two superpowers maneuvered for control not only of Berlin but also of the entire world, and it sometimes looked as though only a nuclear holocaust would break the stalemate. But times eventually changed in Berlin—not because of nuclear war, but because something on the inside was working its way out. Communism was collapsing from the inside. And in a moment of great historical significance, the wall came down on November 9, 1989.

If you travel to Berlin today, you can still see the distinction between sides of the city. While massive restructuring programs are going on, some visitors have said that much of the architecture still tells a tale of division and separation. And there are historical markers and monuments where the wall once stood. In one of these places hangs a mural that reads, “Many small people who do many small things in many small places can change the fate of the world.” (Citation: Matt Williams, “Berlin: Untangling the Past,” *World Traveler*, July 2003) The change in Berlin, and in our entire world, didn't happen through bombs; it happened in the hearts and minds of individuals. I think this mural captures the truth of **blessing** perfectly.

The thing that impresses me most about God is not creation. While the beauty I encounter every day often overwhelms me, it rarely stretches my imagination to think of God creating the world out of nothing. I expect the miraculous from God. What blows my mind is that God creates good from bad.

Even more, I'm surprised that he calls us to join him in this job of re-creation.

■ How has God created good from bad in your life?

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■ How has God used you to create good from bad in someone else's life?

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Many people stop developing the story of their lives at the place we stopped yesterday. For them, baptism (gaining life through death) is the ultimate goal. Sadly, Christianity to many is just about salvation. Once they are in the Christian tent, nothing else really matters. Others feel there must be more, but because they don't understand God's purpose or mission in this world, they spend their days merely trying to make a clear distinction between those who are Christian and those who are not. Tragically, this distinction often becomes nothing more than behavior management, and the Christian's mission becomes the life of "No." Pencil dives rule the day. This is the kind of world into which Jesus came. The ruling Pharisees were a sect bent on distinguishing the true Israel. Because of Israel's past failures—due to the nation being influenced by a broken world—the Pharisees decided the best way to make sure Israel fulfilled God's purposes was to manage everyone's behavior. To put it in the analogy we used on the first day, Israel had been kicked out of the pool for diving in the shallow end, and the Pharisees tried to solve the problem by hanging a big "No Diving" sign. The way they made sure they didn't fall into the world's trap again was through distancing themselves from the world. You can see why Jesus got into trouble when he told the Pharisees they were missing the point by going to an opposite extreme from their ancestors. Even more, you can see the flips and dives for which Jesus was crucified—ministering to sinners, healing the lame, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor.

If we are honest about the monumental change we have experienced, I think we will admit there is something within us calling us to more than pencil dives. **We are not called away from the world but to it.** While we are often paralyzed by fear, we long to flip and dive, to pick up Jesus' mission as our own just as the disciples did in the years after Jesus' ascension to heaven. Blessing calls us toward this end.

"Blessing" is the word we're using to describe life after salvation. We mean more than "being blessed." Blessing describes the kind of lives we are to live. We, as Christians, are called to be a blessing to our world. To understand this mission, we must journey back to the beginning and understand God's calling to one of the fathers of our faith.

Read Genesis 12:1-4

Fill in the blanks:

Genesis 12:3 says, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_ will be \_\_\_\_\_ through \_\_\_\_\_."

■ What was God's call to Abram?

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Two commands structure Abram's calling. The first is to go forth: "leave your country" (verse 1). The second is "be a blessing" (verse 2). While we lose the impact of this message in many English translations, what God was calling Abram to do was to go forth to be a blessing. Here is the essence of following God in a few words. We are people on a journey, and that journey leads us to be blessings for our world.

Before this point, the story of the world had been dominated by brokenness. Adam and Eve had fallen and started a downward spiral in which Cain stumbled, followed by the people of Noah's day, and even Noah himself. The downward spiral continued as the Tower of Babel was being erected, when men and women tried to build a structure of their own to reach to heaven. It was a dismal failure. Yet God was implementing a plan for the human race that no men or women could enact for themselves. This plan made the way

for humanity to come back home. Part of this plan called for one chosen man, Abram, to do the unthinkable—leave his home country and journey to a place he would only know when he got there. He had no map or directions. Abram was simply to leave and trust that God would guide his steps. As Abram journeyed, God would take his faith and bless the world through it. While the world was still falling, one chosen man began to travel in a different direction. Of course, Abram would still struggle with sin, but the defining characteristic of his life was not falling but faith and, ultimately, blessing. Through Abram, God created a nation. Through this nation, the Messiah was born. Through this Messiah and his followers, the world is being redeemed.

Redefining Normal is about bridging the gap from baptism to blessing in our lives. We'll look at Christianity as more than a set of behaviors we avoid. We'll understand that we have been changed for a mission and that we are to further the calling Jesus assumed in Luke 4. God has called us to be part of his re-creative work in the world. Christians are people who, as they journey home themselves, also bring home to their journey. We are people who are not separate from the world but separate for the world.

### prayer exercise:

Use the chart on the next page to help you understand the continual story of beauty, brokenness, baptism, and blessing in the life of Israel. Once you have looked at it, take some time to chart your own spiritual journey in the space below. Your chart probably looks a lot like Israel's journey. Notice the way that God continues to deliver even when his people fall. Notice the times that Israel and you have joined him in this re-creative work. Thank God for calling you to be a blessing to the world.

# a history of God's people



