



# NORMAL'S JOURNEY

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with

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To our children,

Benjamin Enoch Zhijang Ballard

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**Normal's Journey**

What Is the Gospel?

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Published by Northeastern Baptist Press

Post Office Box 4600

Bennington, VT 05201

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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-953331-03-8

ePub ISBN: 978-1-953331-04-5

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# Foreword

There is a romantic aspect to the ministry. There is the challenge of preaching—sometimes to relatively large congregations, the challenge of taking the gospel to exotic places, the opportunity to lead in some ethical or moral emphasis much needed by the social order, and hundreds of other romantic adventures. But, every pastor knows that the “romance” of the ministry disappears rather quickly. There is an old adage about flying that says that “the business of flying is a matter of hours and hours of boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror.” Such is also a reasonable assessment of the ministry. The moments of “stark terror” are actually moments that you crave if for no other reason than to break the boredom and the the humdrum of the daily ministry.

Any pastor, therefore, can identify with the story of *Normal's Journey*. Normal's name is felicitously chosen because the single character of this book is a normal human being with absolutely normal circumstances, a normal family, and a normal church relationship. Yet, for all the normality, Normal finds himself in a position of knowing that he is not really happy. Something is

missing from his life and he cannot figure out what is missing.

While today Mark Ballard is a college president, he served many years as a pastor. Drawing upon his years of pastoral experience, Ballard has written in a sense the story of his pastoral ministry, literally to hundreds of people. A few along the line have been supernatural and not just one or two abnormal, but for the most part the people that the pastor deals with are unfailingly, well, normal! Often along the road these normal Christians seek a breakthrough to a more meaningful experience. The author of this book is well aware of the fact that too many Christians end up looking in the wrong place. Consequently, he has portrayed for us the magnificent discovery that this normal Christian makes, namely that the fulfillment of his dreams is found in his personal walk and relationship with Christ.

Every pastor will find his own ministry described in *Normal's Journey*. He may even find it to be a personal testimony of his own life. *Normal's Journey* is therefore the perfect gift to a believer who has reached that point in his Christian journey where he longs for something more profound than what he is experiencing in his day-by-day journey. This monograph could probably not have been written by someone other than a pastor or at least someone whose efforts to enhance the spiritual life of others are a front burner item.

The insights gained from the reading of this book will show the wisdom of years serving in a very secular

society and yet faithfully ministering to the people of God in the midst of that society. The book has a thorough grasp of what really matters and what is peripheral, and that may be its greatest asset in the end. Whatever the case, *Normal's Journey* will be of infinite value to any pastor advising a saint who wants to experience the supernatural.

Paige Patterson

President

Sandy Creek Foundation

Dallas, TX

Part 1

# THE JOURNEY



# Chapter 1

## THE INTRUDER

Like a nodding driver sideswiping a guardrail, Normal jerked awake. Something was wrong.

His bedside clock glowed 2:27.

*What is it? What's wrong?*

Normal checked the digital setting on his Sleep Number Bed. Fifty-one—his “ideal setting for maximum comfort.”

Was it a dream? He didn't recall one.

Was it Average? He sensed her familiar, comfortable warmth.

In the darkness he listened with war-zone sentry intensity. The furnace murmured. Baseboard radiators clicked. The water softener's backwash activated at 2:30.

*It's nothing. Go back to sleep.*

Normal rolled over and adjusted. He snuggled close to Average. He was cozy and comfortable, but his eye-

lids wouldn't stay shut. A nagging feeling picked at his mind; then he knew.

*Someone's broken in!*

On high alert, the family protector slid from under the covers and into his slippers. Average didn't stir; she slept soundly, oblivious to the imminent danger. Normal moved through the darkness of their master suite. He felt for the doorknob, took a deep breath to steady his nerves, and eased the door open. His whole body was tense, ready to pounce on the intruder.

A single nightlight's soft glow barely illuminated the hallway. Even so, Normal determined it was empty. *Hallway clear*, he thought, and reminded himself to breathe.

Happy's bedroom door was ajar. Happy was their 15 year-old son. Moody's room was at the far end of the hall. As usual, their 17 year-old daughter's door was closed.

Like a special ops team-member, Normal crept down the hall. His slippers made a barely audible \*scrinch\* on the wool Berber carpet. He hoped the intruder couldn't hear it.

Normal checked Happy's room and bath—no one hiding in the shower. *Clear*.

Happy slept soundly and ... happily. In spite of the funky teenage boy aroma, all was well.

Normal checked Moody's door. Locked. As expected. He pressed his ear against the door but heard nothing. Moody was safe.

He checked the guest suite and bath. *Clear*. At least the intruder had not made it to the second floor.

Normal paused at the top of the stairs to listen. Silence.

He made a quick assessment. *If this is a robbery, the intruder's experienced. He's working quietly. If it's a home invasion, he may be hiding. Either way, I'll take him by surprise. He's on my turf.*

Normal moved down the stairs, clearing the last two with a leap. Landing at the front door, he checked the locks. "Secure," he whispered. He imagined an ear-piece in his right ear and a sub-vocalization microphone at the base of his throat. Normal had definitely been filling his action movie quota.

Normal turned to his left, leaned against the wall and peeked in before entering the living room. Cautiously, he checked beside and behind each piece of furniture. "Living room secure," he whispered. "Checking the family room and kitchen."

LED lights on various kitchen appliances cast a faint, irregular, eerie green light onto the kitchen floor. The family room, however, was mostly in shadows. A quick dart in and check around the furniture revealed nothing amiss, but he had to check for the intruder crouching behind the kitchen bar. Normal crawled covertly from the couch to the corner of the bar and quick-peeked, nose and eyeball, around the bar.

Relief. *Family room and kitchen clear. Moving into the dining room next.*

He eased back behind the bar to breathe, gather his nerves, and message a cramp in his left thigh. And that was when ... a stack of junk mail poured onto his head and into his lap. He had jostled the barstool where it was stacked.

Normal choked back a scream. He tried to calm himself. *Breathe. Control your bladder. You're not under attack.* The pep talk helped a little, but very little. His heart was pounding. He was nearing hyperventilation, but he knew he had to complete his mission.

With a trembling hand he pushed the mail aside and steeled himself to investigate the dining room. The family was counting on him. At least they would be if they were awake and aware of their peril.

The dining room was a bit darker than the other rooms on the ground floor. Milky light from a streetlamp formed gray shadows near a drapery and sheer-covered window. The rest of the dining room stood dark, except for a tiny green light glowing in the smoke detector on the ceiling.

Normal took a couple of deep breaths and prepared to spring through the dining room door.

*Go! Go! Go!*

A summersault through the door sailed Normal's right slipper into the darkness beside the dining room table. *Equipment malfunction! Repairs in progress.*

Normal crawled beside the table, groping for his slipper in the darkness. When he found it and slipped it on, he stood in a crouched, wrestler's position—feet

spread, knees bent, arms chest high, hands ready. He pivoted to his left, searching the shadows. And froze.

In horror, Normal stared into a pair of large, cruel eyes, only inches away.

The features were difficult to distinguish, but Normal could see the intruder was huge. He was also ugly—hideously ugly. His eyes bulged in distorted features. Obviously he had been in multiple disfiguring prison fights.

Normal would have run from the room screaming, but panic cemented his feet to the floor. It choked his larynx.

Somewhere he had heard advice for such a situation. Shock your intruder into submission with a sharply spoken, authoritative question, "What are you doing here!" He tried but it didn't come out exactly that way.

"Whump," he whimpered. "Guu-lk."

Normal's heart galloped out of control. Perspiration popped out on his face and neck and trickled down his back. A large drop of sweat dripped from the end of his nose. He stared into the horrifying, unblinking eyes.

Normal tried to swallow. It was hard to breathe. He had to do something.

*Quick! Jab his eyes; now or never!* Normal's panic-stiffened arm responded with an awkward wave.

The vicious, escaped prisoner waved back.

Distorted features softened as Normal's eyes adjusted. Normal blinked. The intruder blinked. Normal lowered his trembling hands. So did the intruder.

He was neither as big nor as ugly as Normal initially thought. In fact, he was quite handsome for being up so late. Normal moved the decorative bowl aside so he could see his whole face in the mirror of Average's china cabinet.

Normal stood on Jell-O legs and breathed the sweet air of the rescued. He wiped his face and neck on the tail of his damp t-shirt.

Normal continued checking the first floor, but he knew all was safe. The bathroom and laundry room were secure. The windows and doors were locked and unbroken. He checked the three-car garage. He checked the man cave, guest suite, and family/game room in the basement. All was safe.

Yet, the gnawing feeling didn't go away. Something *was* wrong.