

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(March 14, 2010)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

More

(Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 8-9; Acts 4)

Introduction: Average vs. normal...

It's not necessarily good news when the doctor tells you that your blood pressure is "average." But if he says, "*Your blood pressure is 'normal'*" - well, that's something to celebrate.

An "average" marriage is something to endure. Sadly, many average marriages end early.

On the other hand, a normal marriage is a challenging, but enjoyable walk through life where a husband and a wife meet difficulties together and celebrate victories together.

Average and normal are not at all the same things.

Average: a level of behavior typical of a group

Normal: behavior conforming to a set standard

"Average" is purely descriptive. It tells us what is the behavior typical of a given group.

"Normal" prescribes. It sets up a certain level of behavior as "normative" and dares you to shoot for that "norm."

The distinction between *average* and *normal* is important and can be applied to many areas of life. The average weight-to-height ration in our country is far different than would be the prescribed weight-to-height norm.

We could ask the question of normal vs. average of people's intelligence, work and study habits, or athletic abilities. We could even turn the question to spiritual matters.

I wonder what would be the average Christian experience of most people who claim to be believers in Jesus?

The Christian pollster, George Barna, says that there is a negligible difference between believers (those who affirm that Jesus is their Savior because of their personal trust in Him) and non-believers.

When it comes to the likelihood of divorce, telling lies, taking something that doesn't belong to them, engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage, visiting pornographic websites, gambling, consulting a medium or a psychic, physically fighting or abusing someone, gossiping or drinking enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, Christians and non-Christians are statistically tied.¹

That's "average" Christian behavior. But that is a far cry from "normal" or "normative" Christian behavior.

Listen to the Bible describe the normal Christian life.

[Acts 5:40] They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. [41] So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

[2 Cor. 2:14] But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

[2 Cor. 12:9] And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

¹ UnChristian, p. 47.

[10] Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

[1 Peter 1:8] and though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory

Those passages tell us what is the normal Christian life, and, yes, they paint a far different picture than the average.

Or we could try to describe an “average” church.

As churches are made up of Christians, the *average* church might not be much marked by distinctively Christian virtues like love, peace, and joy. We might suspect that hypocrisy would be prevalent and that judgmentalism would dominate.

But the *normal* church described in many places in the New Testament is radically Jesus-like. Consider this list of traits of the life of a normal church from Romans, chapter 12.

[6] Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; [7] if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; [8] or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. [9] Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. [10] Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; [11] not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; [12] rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, [13] contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

Sounds pretty exciting, doesn't it?²

² Or consider this description from the first church ever: *[Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. [43] Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. [44] And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; [45] and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all,*

This morning, if you would characterize your own experience as a believer as more “average” than “normal” you're not alone. If you were to look at our church and think “average” rather than “normative”, you're probably not far off the mark.

But if you come to the conclusion that you and we are not quite experiencing the “normal” that God would have for us, you're probably also hungering and thirsting for something MORE.

Throughout history, God's people have often cried out to God for MORE.

It is normal for believers to long for breakthroughs, to hunger for God to do things that are unmistakably HIM, to thirst for Him to unleash His power and to glorify Himself by life-transforming, soul-saving works.

Some of these seasons of longing are recorded for us in the Bible. We come across one of them late in the Old Testament book of Ezra.

God's People Yearn for “MORE” from God

During the Days of Ezra, the Scribe (Ezra, chapters 9-10)

Back in Jerusalem

When we come to Ezra, chapter 9, the Jews have been back in Palestine for a generation or more after having spent seventy long years in Babylonian captivity.

It was wonderful to be back home again in Jerusalem!

And there should be no doubt about it. They have made remarkable progress in returning to “normal” life under God.

as anyone might have need. [46] Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, [47] praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Progress made!

God's Temple had been rebuilt. Granted, it wasn't anything like the magnificent temple King Solomon had built. But it was a place to worship God - and that was something they hadn't been able to properly do while in Babylon.

They were once again offering sacrifices on the altar in the temple. The religious rites were again being carried out.

But, the Jews couldn't escape the gnawing sense that they weren't experiencing all that God wanted them to experience.

There were blessings they were missing out on. The fullness of God's presence wasn't theirs. They weren't shining as God's lamp to the nations as they dreamed that they would, when they dared to dream back in Babylon. Honestly, they wanted MORE.

Then one day it came to the attention of Ezra, a leader of the Jews during this era,³ that there was a problem. Something needed to be addressed. Something sinful and unacceptable was going on among God's people that was blocking the flow of God's blessings.

Sin exposed (9:1-2)

Specifically, there was intermarriage between God's people and the people of the surrounding nations.

It wasn't simply a matter of Jew marrying Gentile. The practice involved the Jews setting aside their former spouses, getting involved with sexual immorality, and compromising purity of worship.

³ Ezra was a scribe and a priest who *[Ezra 7:10] had had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel*. He had led a contingent of five thousand Jews back to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity some fifteen years prior to Nehemiah's arrival,³ with the self-appointed task of restoring right worship to the city. Together, Ezra and Nehemiah teamed to restore Jerusalem to its God-ordained place in the world as a light for Him. Nehemiah focused his efforts on political, military, and economic reform, while Ezra's focus was on the overtly spiritual.

Ezra and the people mourned (9:3ff)

When Ezra, the priest and scribe, heard about this, he sat down, appalled at what his fellow Jews were doing!

He spent most of the day that he received this news devastated, doing nothing. He had no energy.

But near the end of the day he arose and went to the place of worship, fell on his knees and began to deal with God about the matter.

He confessed sin. Take time some time to read through Ezra 9:5-15. To read this prayer is to read a heart-breaking account of a man pouring out his soul to God.

He's honest, vulnerable, transparent. He admits that they, the people of God, are guilty, guilty, guilty. He begs for mercy and forgiveness from God.

We don't know how long he spent praying. But when he finally took a break and looked up, Ezra discovered that he was surrounded by fellow Jews who were also weeping bitterly. They have gathered to him. His flaming heart for God and for MORE has sparked a desire in their hearts for MORE, too.

They join Ezra in weeping and praying and fasting.

This group of soul-weary but determined Jews makes a decision to call for a gathering of all the Jews to address the situation head on. Everyone was to come to Jerusalem.

Gathering to rectify and obey the Word

The call went out and the people came. Great crowds of Jewish men came to the city to listen to Ezra.

They knew that they were not experiencing the full blessing God had promised would be theirs if they lived faithfully.

They longed for that blessing, and had the good sense to know that if they turned from their sinful ways, they would receive His blessing. He would give them the MORE they hungered for.

To really grasp what went on when they came together we have to put ourselves in their shoes/sandals.

Those of us who have lived in San Antonio a long time know that weather can be problematic (as, in truth, it can be anywhere). Schedule something out of doors and you had better have a "Plan B". It might rain. If the event is in the Spring, there might hail. Winter time? It might snow.

We San Antonians have been known to cancel outdoors events days ahead of the event on the threat of bad weather!

But the Jews of Ezra's day came to Jerusalem, stood and listened as Ezra explained the situation to them, kept standing and listening as he called them to repentance, kept standing while Ezra blasted them for their sin - all the while it was raining hard on a cold December day.

They were desperate in their longing for MORE from God! And the result of their gathering was that they put aside their foreign wives and returned to their Jewish wives, paving the way for the outpouring of the blessing of God.

One book over, we find another example of God's people hungering for MORE from God. This episode is recorded in Nehemiah, beginning at chapter 8.

Nehemiah was the governor of Palestine at the same time that Ezra was serving as priest and scribe.

When we turn to Nehemiah 8, the Jews of Jerusalem have just finished the work of re-building the wall around the city. That wall had been broken down for one hundred and forty years - and it was rebuilt in fifty-two days. Wow!

With that work done, the way was cleared for the second and weightier phase of the work to begin - the work of spiritual restoration.

The people gathered near one of the main gates of Jerusalem, "as one man" (in unity), at the Water Gate, to begin that work.

During the Days of Governor Nehemiah (Nehemiah, chapters 8-9)

The people gathered at the Water Gate

[8:1] And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.

The people ask for the Law

You can bet that Ezra was thrilled with the people's request. They asked him to bring them the Bible - in fact, a particular portion of the Jewish Bible.

They asked for the part of the Old Testament called Law. Prophecy is intriguing. Poetry is beautiful. History is interesting.

But the people weren't asking for those portions of Scripture. They wanted God's Law.

They wanted to know what God required of them and Law gave them the clear pathway to obedience.

It was a fitting day for a public reading of the Word of God.

The people listen

[2] Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who could listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.⁴

⁴ In the Jewish sacred calendar, Tishri was the 7th month. But, in the civic calendar, it was referred to as the first month. Tishri is approximately equivalent to our September.

The seventh month is the month of holy days for the Jews. Included in this month is the Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah)⁵, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur)⁶ and the week long Feast of Tabernacles (Succoth).⁷

On Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the civic year, the people have gathered to hear the Scripture read. They are hungry for God's truth.

There is physical movement as they prepare to listen.

[6] Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Out of reverence for God and for His Word, the people stood and listened - and they listened and listened and listened.

For long hours the people stood, attentive, completely absorbed in what they were hearing.

They were taking in the words of the Law the way a starving person gobbles up food. Consuming it, feasting on it, devouring it, ingesting it.

And what do you think was the response of the people as they listened to the Law? Exuberance? Sheer joy??

Not hardly. They wept!

"Good grief" leads to repentance leads to obedience

[9] Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.

Instead, the people were weeping and mourning. Why?

⁵ The beginning of the civic year observed on the first two days of the month.

⁶ Observed on the tenth day of the month.

⁷ Celebrated from the 15th through the 22nd day of the month.

Well, for long hours they had listened to God's Word as it was read to them. They heard the stories of creation, of God's choice of Abraham, the faith and apostasy of the patriarchs, God's sovereign protection of the nation, and His salvation of Israel through the Exodus.

Then, they heard the Ten Commandments, the ins and outs of the sacrificial system, the Law's moral requirements, the ethical demands of God.

They heard all the *should's* and the *should not's*. And as they heard command after command, they became aware that they had not done the *shoulds* and that they had committed the *should not's*.

They were convicted of **SIN**. They saw how badly they had dropped the ball of obedience.

They were grieving because they were convicted of their guilt before God. How did they know their guilt? The Bible told them so!

The Jews' grief was necessary and good - for a time. But, very shortly, grief needs to morph into REPENTANCE.

After all, God did not provide commands so that His people would feel badly when they disobeyed. He gave commands so that His people would do what He wants them to do!

And what God wanted His people to do on Rosh Hashanah, the New Year of Israel, was to party hearty! So that is exactly what they did. They dried their tears, obeyed God, and threw a party - just like the Law told them to do.

That was the first day of the month. The next day they gathered again to hear God's Word.

Gathering again - for insight... (v. 13)

[13] Then on the second day the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.

What did the Jews discover when they gathered a second time to listen to the Law?

When they came back for more insight, they discovered that there was a week-long festival they were supposed to be celebrating. The Feast of Tabernacles.

[14] They found written in the law⁸ how the Lord had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.

So what did they do? Well, they immediately turned the city of Jerusalem into a tent city and lived in those tents for a week, just like the Bible told them to do.⁹

With the festival over the people are still not at all satisfied. They want MORE. MORE instruction from God about how to live and MORE of His power and blessing unleashed among them.

So, they gathered yet again, on the twenty fourth day of the month for another extended time of listening to Ezra read the Bible out loud to them.

Gathering on the 24th day of the month

This third gathering, even more than the first two events, was for the explicit purpose of listening, reflecting and discovering what God wanted from them so that they might experience MORE of His blessing and power in their lives.

There is no biblical mandate for the people to come together on the 24th day of the 7th month. This coming together was completely at the initiative of the people of God.

⁸ Maybe Ezra had just finished reading Leviticus 23, which describes this Feast. If not that, then in some way they were informed or reminded of the section of Scripture that dealt with the Feast of Tabernacles, while they were listening to the exposition of the Word.

⁹ Nehemiah tells us that this particular obedience had not been observed for a thousand years.

And on this twenty fourth day of the month, they spent a fourth of the day (three hours) listened to the reading of the Law of God (while standing) and another three hours confessing their sins and worshipping God.

And at the conclusion of the time in worship (often referred to as a holy convocation), the Jews signed a document pledging their allegiance to God and their obedience to God. That's just what we read about in the book of Ezra! They were once again paving the way for obedience to God!

Summary: Notice the pattern we find in Ezra and Nehemiah.

- Reflection on Scripture led to insight (about sin or needed obedience)
- Insight led to mourning
- Mourning led to worship
- Worship led to action

God's people hungered for MORE - more of the blessing of God in their lives; more of His power in their community. They listened to the Word of God, prayed, and then were given grace to rectify situations that they saw needed to be changed, paving the way for an outpouring of God's blessing.

They longed for MORE from God and were willing to do whatever was necessary to remove obstacles to His greatest blessing.

That hunger for MORE from God permeates the pages of the New Testament as well.

Fast forward four and half centuries from the time of Ezra and Nehemiah to the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after the crucifixion of Jesus.

During the Early Days of the Church (chapter 4)

Acts 2 - Pentecost!

Jesus has died, risen from the dead and ascended into Heaven. His followers were still in Jerusalem when the Day of Pentecost, a Jewish holy day, arrived. It was on the Day of Pentecost that the promised Holy Spirit fell, filling them with power.

They spoke in languages they had never learned. They proclaimed the glory of God. Peter preached a sermon about Jesus - and three thousand souls were saved!

In the days that followed, God performed mighty miracles, healings, signs and wonders, all of these validating that the message the Christians were proclaiming about Jesus was true.

There was great fellowship among the early disciples as they gave themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship (literally "shared life"), to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Only a few short days after Pentecost, Peter and John were walking out of the Temple where they had gone to worship, when a lame man spoke to them, begging food.

Acts 3 - Miraculous healing and a powerful message

By the power of God, Peter healed the man. A crowd gathered. And Peter, never one to waste an opportunity, launched into another mighty sermon about Jesus.

As a result of the healing and the testimony of Peter more and more people were saved, so that by the time we get to Acts chapter 4 there are well over five thousand members of the first church ever.

However, this episode did result in a challenging situation. The same religious rulers who had opposed Jesus during His lifetime still opposed Him after His death!

So Peter and John were arrested and brought before the rulers. It was a short trial, comprised mostly of bluster and threats.

At the end of the day the two apostles were let go with the warning that they had better not speak anymore in the name of Jesus, a warning that neither Peter nor John had any intention of heeding!

Acts 4 - Released to plead with God for MORE

And what did these guys do when they were released? They went straight to their brothers and sisters in Christ. Why? To cry out to God! For what? You're going to love this!

In one of the most exciting prayer meetings in history, these early disciples of Jesus begged God for one thing and one thing only: boldness.

They didn't pray for safety or protection. They didn't pray, "*No more arrests, please!*" They simply prayed that they would be given grace to continue to proclaim the Gospel, despite whatever opposition might come their way.

And embedded in their prayer was a recognition of their need for God to continue to go before them performing miracles as He had been doing to this point. (He would soften up the people; they would mop up afterwards)

They had experienced something of the power of God and they longed for MORE. They had seen souls saved and they wanted MORE. Their own lives had been transformed and they weren't satisfied. They wanted MORE.

Acts 29 - Here and now

Doesn't that ring true? Don't you long for MORE?

There may be good things going on in your life. Some wonderful fruit from the Spirit of God. Some whiffs of His grace. Wouldn't you love to see MORE?

There are some good things going on at church right now - no doubt about it. But do you think He might have MORE in store for us?

Wouldn't it be great if we saw more of His power demonstrated in lives changed, souls saved, families restored, illnesses healed and long-standing addictions broken? Wouldn't you love to see that?

Wouldn't you love to see radical love flowing among us, the fruit of the Spirit bursting out all over the place, God's power unleashed among us?

Yeah. Me, too.

Conclusion:

I suspect that you, a Christian, hunger for MORE.

I suspect that if you are a member, a friend, or a regular attender of Northwest Community Church, you long to see MORE here.

If you have a passion for MORE, then allow yourself to engage in a little bit of holy dissatisfaction, a little bit of sanctified discontentedness.

Go ahead. Admit your hunger for more. Cry out to God. They did it in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. The first century church did the same.

Of course we realize that God has given us EVERYTHING we need. We understand that He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.

So, when we ask for MORE we are not asking that God fill up a deficit. We're not saying that we lack something necessary that God hasn't given us.

When we ask for MORE we are simply, earnestly, and honestly asking that we not have a church where the things that are happening can be explained on the basis of our initiative, our cleverness, our planning, our skill.

We are asking that He do the things that only He can do, which assures that He gets all the credit and all the glory.

Asked in this way, His people have been asking Him for MORE for thousands of years. Let's join those who have asked for MORE in the past by asking in this season for MORE here, now.