

# JESUS IS \_\_\_\_\_.

FIND A NEW WAY TO BE HUMAN

BY JUDAH SMITH

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE



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# JUDAH SMITH



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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# CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION	5
<b>SESSION 1: SCANDALOUS GRACE</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>SESSION 2: FRIEND OF SINNERS</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>SESSION 3: WITH YOU ALWAYS</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>SESSION 4: ALIVE TOGETHER</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>SESSION 5: ACCUSERS &amp; ADVOCATES</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>SESSION 6: COUNT THE WAYS</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>SESSION 7: WITH US AND FOR US</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>SESSION 8: LIVE LIKE YOU'RE RIGHTEOUS</b>	<b>115</b>

# INTRODUCTION

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Jesus is \_\_\_\_\_. How would you fill in that blank?

That question is at the heart of a campaign The City Church launched a couple of years ago with the goal of getting Seattle to think about Jesus. Our purpose wasn't to tell anyone what to believe. We just wanted people to get Jesus on their minds. We gave them a chance to fill in the blank on our website, [jesus-is.org](http://jesus-is.org), and thousands of answers came in. Some were profound. Some were hilarious. Some were spiteful. But all of them said something about the spiritual journeys of the people filling in the blank.

Who is Jesus to you? Your answer will affect how you make day-to-day decisions, how you face challenges and failures, how you love people, and how you relate to God.

The goal of this small group study guide is to help you fill in that blank by looking at what the Bible says about who Jesus is. My prayer is that Jesus will become the focus of your spiritual journey. Whether this is the first time you have ever approached this topic or you have known him for as long as you can remember, Jesus is waiting to show you more about his love, his grace, and his goodness. Jesus is a new way to live, and you are going to love the journey ahead.

An important part of this *Jesus Is* study is the small group discussions. Small groups are a great place to process the material in the

book and the videos. Feel free to ask questions, discuss difficult topics, and learn from others about what God has been saying in their lives.

I would also encourage you to do your part to make your small group a safe place for everyone. That means letting other participants express their opinions, struggles, and questions without feeling as if you have to fix everyone. Jesus will take care of that—and he's better than any of us at fixing people.

By the way, this is not a curriculum about how to fix yourself, either. I'm not going to tell you areas where you need to try harder or work more. I'm just going to remind you how amazing Jesus is. How incredible his grace is. How complete your righteousness is. If I can help you keep looking at Jesus, I will have been successful. Really, it's not me anyway: pointing people to Jesus is the Holy Spirit's specialty, and we would do well to look where he's pointing.

Focusing on Jesus means thinking about who he is and what he does. It means looking at yourself less and at him more. As you read, discuss, and think about Jesus in the coming weeks, you will discover that when you focus on Jesus, loving God is easier. Loving other people is easier. Overcoming temptation and exercising self-control are easier. Life is richer, fuller, and happier.

## ■ HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

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Each session will begin with a DVD clip talking about the topic for the session. Following the clip, there will be time for group discussion.

Each session also includes five mini-topics for personal study during the week. These mini-topics consist of a Bible passage, a short

devotional thought, and a few questions for reflection. This is an opportunity to expand on the weekly topic during your own prayer time each day.

If you would like to write out your answers to the daily questions, space is provided in the Participant's Guide; however, this is a personal journal, and you don't need to worry about sharing your answers with others. The idea is that you take a few minutes to apply the concepts to your life, your circumstances, and your spiritual journey.

No matter where you find yourself in your relationship with God, these next few weeks are going to be a lot of fun. Jesus is your friend, your confidant, and your advocate. The closer you draw to him, the more you will enjoy his abundant life. Thank you for joining the discussion!

# SCANDALOUS GRACE

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**H**umans are doers by nature. We are constantly going, doing, working, earning, building. We are taught from childhood that if something is to be had, it must be worked for. It must be earned.

Our work ethic is a good thing, but it's no wonder we struggle to understand and accept the gift of God's grace.

Grace can be defined as God's unmerited, unearned favor. But we can't believe something as wonderful as that could be free, so we look everywhere for the strings we are convinced are attached. Surely we did something to earn this. Or maybe it was free to start with, but now God must expect something in return.

In order to benefit from God's grace the way he intends, we must learn to embrace grace for exactly what it is: free, undeserved, and unconditional.

As you watch the video and listen to the story of the prodigal son, keep something in mind. Often, in a

well-meaning attempt at humility, we compare ourselves to the son in regard to our sinfulness, our rebellion, and our desperation. We focus on our waywardness and our need for God.

It's true that without God, we are lost and desperate. But that's not the main message of this story. There's another similarity between the prodigal son and each of us that is harder to spot, yet ultimately more dangerous. It's the way he related to his father. It's the tendency he had to measure his worth and his identity by his own good or bad deeds.

This is a story about grace. Scandalous, incredible, ridiculous grace. And it's a story you and I need to take to heart.

## ■ WATCH THE DVD

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Play Session 1: Scandalous Grace

Read aloud as a group the following Scripture passages before continuing on to discussion:

- Ephesians 2:8–9
- Acts 15:11
- Romans 11:6

## ■ GROUP DISCUSSION

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1. In Jesus' story of the prodigal son, what surprises you most about the father's reaction to his son's return?

2. Why would the father disregard cultural expectations and run toward a son who had left him as he did?
3. Do you find this story to be “scandalous,” as Jesus’ audience did, because someone is rewarded for bad behavior? Or is it comforting and reassuring? What does your answer reveal about your view of God’s love for you?
4. How did Jesus’ three stories answer the question, why does Jesus hang out with bad people?
5. Can a perfect God be wrong for loving you just as you are? What is the hardest thing for you to understand when you consider God’s love and his justice?
6. In what ways have you found yourself “putting your ducks in a row” before coming to God?
7. How does it feel to hear that Jesus is like a “groupie,” obsessed with you?

## DAILY READINGS

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### ■ DAY **1**

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For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Read the scripture for today and consider:

- Why do we typically feel the need to earn someone's gift to us, or at least pay him or her back for it somehow?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul used the word "gift" to describe what has been given to us through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. If something has been given to us as a gift, then it is free. There is no charge, no obligation, and no debt.

A gift is a simple concept. I've never had to explain what it means to my kids. They just get it. On Christmas and birthdays, not once have they offered to reimburse me for their Lego set or football. Not once have they set the toys down, gone into the kitchen, and washed dishes until they paid off their presents.

It's grown-ups, us "mature" people, that need to be constantly reminded of the true definition of grace. It's free. It's a gift. And it's ours to keep.

- Have you ever received a valuable gift with no strings attached? Did you feel uncomfortable accepting it? If so, why?

- How would the person who gave you the gift feel if you didn't accept it unconditionally as he or she had intended?

- Have you believed any wrong concepts about God's gift of grace, forgiveness, and eternal life?

## ■ DAY **2**

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Where sin increased, grace increased all the more. (Romans 5:20 NIV)

Read the scripture for today and consider:

- According to this verse, what specific sin or amount of sin cannot be covered by grace?

This verse in Romans 5 is what some might call a dangerous verse. People might get crazy with this verse. Paul says that no matter how much our sin increases, God's grace increases even more. If our hole gets deeper, then God's shovel gets bigger. There's nothing we can do that can't be made up for by God's grace.

See what I mean? Dangerous. What's to stop me from going out and doing whatever I want? If God's grace covers it all, I can do whatever I want, right?

Actually it's more awesome than dangerous.

Grace isn't about what we can get away with. It's about a person. It's about a relationship with Jesus that doesn't depend on how well we've behaved today. When we see Jesus for who he really is, we won't abuse him: we'll embrace him.

God's grace is awesome because no matter how hard we try, we will still fall short of perfection. But every time we mess up, God's grace picks us back up and says, "You're still within my reach."

- How have you seen God's grace continue to pick you up off the ground?

- Is it possible to try too hard to be perfect? Is perfection the main thing God wants you to seek in life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Do you believe that God has enough grace for all your sin for your entire life? How does your answer affect the way you live?

## ■ DAY 3

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For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:9)

Read the scripture for today and consider:

- Is it difficult for you to hear that you do not deserve something—in this case, God's grace? Why or why not?

At no point during his journey did the prodigal cease being the object of his father's love. No matter how far he strayed and no matter what he did, he couldn't make his father stop loving him or looking for him.

The same goes for us with our heavenly Father. "Before the beginning of time" God planned out how he was going to show us grace. Grace always has been and always will be his intent for us. His mercies and grace "never cease" (Lamentations 3:22).

Like the prodigal son, at times we may try to distance ourselves. We may put up a fight. We may try to live independently of God. But God's love for us is based on who he is, not on who we are or how we behave. His love is relentless. His grace is compelling. His goodness breaks down our defenses.

We did nothing to deserve his love, and we can do nothing to preserve it. We simply respond to it through Jesus.

- Paul wrote that "God saved us." From what did he save you? What did you do to deserve salvation?

- What does it mean to be holy? Should that calling be intimidating for you? How does knowing we have God's grace affect your call to a holy life?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Why do you think grace was God's plan from the beginning?

## ■ DAY 4

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You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Read the scripture for today and consider:

- How does Jesus' gift of grace "make you rich"?

Jesus is God, and he existed well before the day he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb. He was in heaven before time began. He was there at creation, he was worshipped and praised by angels, and he had all of heaven's riches and glories at his throne.

And he gave it all up for us. He became poor by the world's standards so that we could become rich by heaven's standards. Remember, "rich" doesn't just mean having money in the bank or a convertible in the garage. It means rich in grace. Rich in righteousness. Rich in God's favor.

When Jesus died on the cross, he took the punishment for our sins so that we wouldn't have to. He took our sin upon himself, so much, in fact, that his Father had to look away. But he did it so the Father would never have to look away from us.

That is Jesus' generous grace in a nutshell.

- Just as the prodigal's father didn't consider it beneath him to lift up his robe and run, Jesus did not consider that a life and death on earth were unfit for royalty like him. Is this easy or hard for you to comprehend? Why?



When children have done something they know is wrong, parents can usually tell just by their demeanor. If you are a parent, you know this is true. You don't even have to see the thing that was broken or lost or spilled. You know something is up because suddenly, your kids are unable to approach you with confidence. Normally they ask you to buy them things constantly. They climb all over you and want to wrestle. They want to tell you every detail about their day. But now, they won't make eye contact, they won't talk to you, and they avoid you.

Why? Because they know they are guilty. Their normal boldness and expectation of favor have been replaced by a sense of impending doom.

Here's the crazy part. You probably aren't nearly as upset as they think you are. But their false perception creates a very real separation.

In today's passage, the writer of Hebrews calls us to "approach God's throne of grace with confidence." Don't run farther away. Don't settle for feeding pigs. And certainly don't stoop to eating the pigs' food. Instead, return to the Father with confidence that his grace continues to increase and that he never stopped loving us or looking out for us. There is nothing he cannot and will not forgive.

- Have you ever been hesitant to come to God and confess your sin? Why were you slow to approach him?

