

**JUDAH  
SMITH**

**NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER**

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

**FIND A  
NEW WAY  
TO BE  
HUMAN**

**Foreword by**

**BUBBA WATSON**

2012 Masters Champion

**JESUS IS \_\_\_\_\_.**

JUDAH SMITH

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FIND A  
NEW WAY  
TO BE  
HUMAN



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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# Foreword

by Bubba Watson  
Two-Time Masters Champion

Sometimes God takes your life for some crazy twists and turns.

When I first heard the name Judah Smith, my dad was just weeks away from being called home to heaven. My trainer, Andrew Fischer, started talking about this great young pastor and encouraged me to listen to him online. He said his name was Judah Smith from Seattle.

A few days later I was checking Twitter, and I noticed a pastor from Seattle named Judah Smith was following me. I wrote and told him that my trainer listened to him online, and we started swapping notes across Twitter over the next several weeks.

Then my dad passed away. He'd been battling cancer for a while, but nothing prepares you for your dad dying—even when you know it's coming. I was closer to my dad than to just about anyone else. He was my coach on and off the course. It was a rough time.

## FOREWORD

Judah was quick to send me some inspiring messages from the Bible. It was a heartfelt gesture and really meant the world to me at that moment. I had no idea at the time that Judah was going through the very same thing. His dad was fighting cancer too. Just two months after my dad passed his dad was called to heaven as well.

Everything from that time is very vivid. I remember it like it was yesterday. I messaged Judah on Twitter to get his phone number. I called him five days after his dad's death and asked if he wanted to come down to my house to play golf. What can I say? Judah's a pastor; he shared Bible verses. I'm a golfer; I shared the green. Judah and his family packed their bags and headed down to Scottsdale.

Judah said he was a .7 handicap at golf, but he shot high 80s that first day we played golf—and not much better after that.

Like I said, God takes you for some crazy twist and turns. The only way you can explain my friendship with Judah is God's plan. Judah has made me stronger in my walk with Christ. He has been a great role model in all parts of life. Judah has helped me be more consistent in seeking God's will and trusting the Lord daily. As our friendship has grown, he has taught me to be a better husband, better dad, better friend, better listener, everything—except maybe a better golfer!

How does he do it? He just shares Jesus. That's what gets Judah started and keeps him going. He wants to help people meet Jesus and become more like Jesus.

I hope *Jesus Is* \_\_\_\_\_ will help you do exactly that. It's a simple message, but it's the kind of message every one of us needs to hear.





# Introduction

I'm thirty-three years old, and I was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, which means I'm addicted to coffee and complaining about the weather. I'm a husband, a father of three, and an okay golfer. I'm also a pastor.

That last bit often makes people feel awkward. They try not to swear around me, which mostly makes me laugh. They think I can't relate to them. A pastor, of course, doesn't swear, have impure thoughts, yell at his kids, watch porn, get drunk, do drugs, or cheat on his wife or taxes. He also judges everyone he sees, doesn't have any fun, tries not to smile, and only has sex because it's a necessary evil in order to perpetuate the species.

Those are stereotypes, of course. Some are true and some are not. But none of them tell the whole story about what it means to be a pastor, a Christian, or even a good person.

Over the last few years, I've been on a journey that has challenged stereotypes—of myself, of sin and sinners, of Jesus himself. It's hard to describe the depth of the transformation

I've experienced, but I do know this: I'll never be the same again.

Christianity is not about not swearing. It's not about not having impure thoughts. Really, it's not about not at all.

Christianity is about Jesus.

## The Campaign

About three years ago, soon after becoming lead pastor, I sat down with the media team at my church and told them I wanted to launch a marketing campaign in our city. My goal: to get Jesus on the mind of Seattle.

I didn't want to promote our church. I didn't want to promote a doctrine. I just wanted people to think more about Jesus.

Out of that little meeting came the "Jesus Is \_\_\_\_" campaign. Our marketing consisted of billboards, bus signs, Facebook ads, bumper magnets (not stickers—people love their cars), and a website, [jesus-is.org](http://jesus-is.org), where people could fill in the blank themselves. We also organized hundreds of what we called "Jesus Is \_\_\_\_ Projects": social outreach events organized by people in our church who cleaned up parks, volunteered at schools, and did other community service projects.

The premise of the campaign was simply to get people thinking about Jesus. We felt that indifference was our greatest enemy. If we could get people to think about Jesus, we reasoned, Jesus was more than able to reveal himself to them.

The response was overwhelming. People have visited

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different pages on our website over one and a half million times. Seventy-five thousand people and counting have submitted answers to the blank. The campaign has been mentioned on atheist websites, porn websites, and church websites. Hackers have targeted it multiple times.

Apparently, Jesus gets a reaction out of people.

The answers people submit are incredibly moving. Perusing the website provides a fascinating commentary on our culture's concept of Jesus. Many submissions, of course, are pro-Jesus. Others are simply funny. Some are bizarre. Many are blatantly anti-Jesus: they are blasphemous, hateful, even perverse.

Within months of launching the campaign, we realized something. Jesus Is \_\_\_\_ was more than a clever campaign or a marketing mantra. It was the mission of our church.

A giant chalkboard in our church lobby now reads, "Our mission: to show you who Jesus is." Underneath, hundreds of handwritten definitions appear each week as people in our church celebrate who Jesus is to them.

I can't think of a better mission in life. I'll probably write more books, but I doubt I will ever write one as important as this. At the same time, this book barely scratches the surface of who Jesus is. Discovering the depths of his love has become my obsession, my passion, and my delight.

## The Bible

I am a Bible person. I don't believe my brain has been functioning long enough to figure out the meaning of life, but the Bible

## INTRODUCTION

is an amazing, divine, supernatural book that shows us the plan of God. It gives us proper perspective in life. I believe that God used humans to write it, but he guided what they wrote, and everything in it is accurate.

It doesn't bother me if you don't believe that, so I hope it doesn't bother you that I do believe it. Actually, I think this book makes sense even if you don't believe it, so it would be great if you approached it with an open mind. None of us has the whole truth, including me, but we can learn from each other.

The Bible is meant to be down-to-earth. It was written for real people facing real issues. So when I preach and write, I often retell Bible narratives in my own words. It's not a new translation; it's a paraphrase, usually with a good dose of humor thrown in. Sometimes I crack myself up; but laughter is biblical, so I feel almost holy laughing at my own jokes.

### My Sticky-Note Brain

You'll discover this soon enough, so I might as well spell it out. I am not a very linear person.

That will delight some of you and frustrate others. I have the attention span of a five-year-old, which is actually fine by me, because five-year-olds enjoy life a heck of a lot more than most adults.

Some of you have brains filled with filing cabinets, all lined up in neat rows. Everything is indexed and alphabetized. You quantify and qualify and calculate your lives, and that's awesome. God bless you.

## INTRODUCTION

The walls of my brain are covered with sticky notes. And the sticky notes are filled with scribbles. And the scribbles are highlighted in multiple neon colors. So if I jump around a bit in this book, now you know why. Pray for me.

### A Final Note

I would not be who I am without the influence of my dad, Wendell Smith. He passed away from cancer in December 2010, and I miss him every day. He was my mentor, my friend, and my hero.

He and my mom, Gini, founded the City Church in 1992. They pastored for seventeen years before turning the church over to my wife, Chelsea, and me in 2009. My dad's faith, generosity, and love were beyond equal.

My father showed me who Jesus is. He started me on a journey of delight and discovery that continues each day.

My prayer is that as you read this book, you also would see Jesus for who he really is. And when you do, he will be irresistible.

JESUS IS your friend.

# ONE

## Superbad or Sortabad

“If God can help so-and-so, he can help *anyone*!”

I’ve heard myself say it a few times. “So-and-so” is always a reference to skilled sinners, famous for their proficiency in wrongdoing. They are awesome at sin, they sin a lot, and they enjoy their sin.

“Did you hear? That actress got another divorce. That’s five failed marriages and this marriage only lasted three months. Man, if God could get her straightened out, he could help anybody!”

“That leader calls himself a Christian, but can you believe what he was involved in? He should be ashamed of himself. If God can help him, he can help anybody!”

Let’s be honest. Mostly good people like to look down on mostly bad people. We enjoy the feelings of condescending pity or self-righteous outrage. We gleefully hold up notorious evildoers as marvels of depravity, examples of just how bad people can get. Then we finish off our lattes, load our

2.2 children into our almost-paid-off SUVs, and head off to contribute to society.

Notice how I just included myself in the “mostly good” category. I didn’t think about it. I just did it.

That’s what bothers me the most.

## The Badness Scale

The problem with the “if God can save . . .” statement is that it implies a rating system for sins. It’s an unspoken, often culture-driven, and arbitrary badness scale (or goodness scale, depending on whether we are rating others or ourselves).

On our scale, we label small sins, medium-small sins, medium sins, medium-large sins, large sins, extra-large sins, and supersized sins. If we see someone with small to medium sins, we think, *He’s a pretty good person. He’s fairly sound and engaged morally. He’s obviously close to Jesus. It won’t be hard for God to get a hold of him.*

Then we see someone with medium to large sins, and we get more nervous. *We really have to pray for her. Her life is going downhill fast. God is going to have to get her attention the hard way. She really needs to work on fixing herself so she can get closer to God.*

When we come across a supersize sinner, someone who commits the big sins, we just shake our heads in hyper-pious pity.

Nowhere in the Bible, however, do we find God distinguishing between levels of sin. God doesn’t share our rating system. To him, all sin is equally evil, and all sinners are



equally lovable. Obviously sins have different consequences: some will get you incarcerated or your face punched in, while others won't even be noticed. But God just calls sin, *sin*.

## Zacchaeus the Gangster

Jesus didn't have a rating system for sin, either. He was willing to accept anyone, to love anyone. Nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector.

I should mention up front that when I read Bible stories, all the main characters have accents. That's just how my mind works. Concentration has never been my strong suit, and I suspect the accents are a desperate ploy sponsored by my brain to keep me focused.

Zacchaeus, in my mind, was a bit of a gangster. If you can't read his dialogue with a bit of swagger, you and I are not going to connect very well for the next few pages. You may need to listen to a few hip-hop albums and try again.

In case you aren't familiar with the story, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Actually, he was a chief tax collector. He was also really short. That's important.

Here's the story, straight from the Bible:

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.”

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled.

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!”

Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”  
(Luke 19:1–10)

Interesting backstory: Israelites of Jesus’s day looked at tax collectors as thieves and pimps. Tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Roman government, which ruled Israel at the time. Their job was to collect taxes from their own people and hand the money over to the hated foreign power. Their own income came from whatever they could get out of people after they met Rome’s quota. So Zacchaeus and his fellow tax-collecting traitors would make up tax amounts on the fly. Zacchaeus was a professional cheat, an embezzler. He took money from little old ladies. He was a thief.

I think Zacchaeus was up on pop culture, by the way. I think he liked making appearances; he liked being in on the action. When they rolled out the red carpet and the cameras showed up, Zacchaeus was going to be there, a lady on each

arm, looking over his sunglasses at the crew from TMZ. “Hey y’all.” When he gave press conferences, he talked about himself in the third person.

Zacchaeus was a short guy, but don’t be deceived by his stature. He had a lot of money. At some point, years before, he had been recruited by the Romans. He was probably a bit of a prodigy. He would have started out as an assistant to a tax collector. After proving his worth, he would have been promoted to tax collector. Ultimately, when we find him in this story, he has become the chief tax collector. He probably oversees an entire tax district and a gang of mini tax collectors who give him a cut of their take.

This makes Zacchaeus a major reject. He is infamous, legendary, notorious. How long has he been doing this? Five years? Longer than that—he’s a chief tax collector. Ten years? Twenty?

I don’t think he minds being hated. In fact, I think he’s loving life. He’s up in his big house overlooking the city, lounging in his infinity pool, with servants fanning him and dropping grapes in his mouth.

Everybody fears him now. Sure, they hate him—but at least they respect him. Back in elementary school, nobody picked the short guy. But now, they’re afraid of the little man. Zacchaeus is the big guy on the block.

Rumor was, Jesus might be the promised Messiah. Zacchaeus had grown up in the Jewish culture, and he would have been familiar with the prophecies. No doubt he had heard that one day there would come a Messiah. Now Jesus is coming through town, and Zacchaeus says, “I’m gonna check this guy out. He’s getting a lot of followers; a lot of guys are talking about him. I’m curious.”

I doubt Zacchaeus was thinking, *Man, I sure hope Jesus saves me.* Saves him from what? His big house? All the ladies who love him?

No, he just wanted to check out the popular guy. Zacchaeus was all about status. You don't become a tax collector and then a chief tax collector and not like money and status. He was famous in a negative sense, but famous nonetheless.

Jesus starts strolling through. People are lining the streets, trying to catch a glimpse of him, and Zacchaeus realizes he can't see over the crowd. *This is jacked up*, he says to himself. *I'm not gonna be able to see this dude.*

Zacchaeus is an innovative guy who is used to getting his way. So he hitches up his blinged-out robe and runs ahead, gold chains clanking, and climbs a sycamore tree.

Sure enough, he can see the dust cloud and all the people clumped around Jesus. You'd think he was Justin Bieber or something. He's rolling down the street, and suddenly—Zacchaeus can't believe his luck—he stops right next to the little man's tree.

*This is dope*, he's thinking. *I can check this guy out from up here; maybe listen in on what he's got to say.*

Then, to Zacchaeus's surprise, Jesus looks up at him. He calls him by name. "Zacchaeus."

"Whaaaa? How do you know me? I don't know you. Who told you about me?"

They say the sweetest sound to a human being's ears is the sound of his or her own name. God calls this rejected, hardened, selfish man by his name: "Zacchaeus, hurry down! I'm heading over to your house—right now."

"You are? Uh, okay. Yeah."

Zacchaeus is relishing the moment. All the upstanding religious Jews want a minute with Jesus, a nod, a handshake. Yet now, the chief tax collector—the biggest bad guy around—gets a personal invitation. I think he’s looking at everyone saying, “Whassup now, y’all?” He sends word to all his cronies and tax collector minions to come over and meet this Jesus. This is his moment in the limelight.

## “I’m Changing Everything”

But that afternoon, something unexpected and unexplainable began to happen in Zacchaeus’s heart. How long did he have an audience with the living God? Two hours? Four hours? We don’t know. What did they talk about? We can only guess.

We can assume that they ate a meal together and Jesus probably listened a lot. Zacchaeus must have thought, *Nobody listens to me, except for a few guys who work for me. But this guy cares. He listens. He gets it.*

I can imagine Zacchaeus looking into the most compassionate eyes he’s ever seen and thinking, *Does Jesus know who I am? Does he know who is around my dinner table? Does he know what we do for a living? Does he know what paid for his fish? Does he know how I paid for this house? He must . . . but he doesn’t reject me.*

After a few hours with Jesus, Zacchaeus can’t contain himself any longer. Abruptly, he stands up, seemingly overwhelmed with who this Jesus is. In front of family, peers, and employees, he blurts out, “I’m changing everything!”

What?

“I’m changing everything, Jesus. I’m gonna start giving my money away. In fact, anyone I’ve ever cheated, I’m gonna give them back four times what I stole.”

The callous, money-hungry mob boss is about to go broke, and he doesn’t even care. A moment with Jesus changed everything.

I wonder what Jesus said in one short afternoon that changed a lifelong taker into a lavish giver. But that’s not the point of this passage. I think the Bible skips over what they talked about because we’d try to turn it into a recipe or a program. It wasn’t what Zacchaeus talked about—it was the person he talked about it with. It was about being with Jesus.

What changed Zacchaeus? Biblical principle? Personal devotion? Religious duty and deeds? No—just a few moments with God in the flesh. We don’t even have a record of anyone telling Zacchaeus he needed to repent or give the money back. But something came over this man when he encountered Jesus.

## Hurry Down

The truth is, I am Zacchaeus. I may not be short in stature, but I’m short spiritually, in my own ability and my own capacity. Even if I want to get to Jesus, even if I want to see Jesus, I can’t see past myself. I can’t see past my sin, past my distractions, past my ego.

How do we try to reach Jesus? We run faster and we climb proverbial trees of religious actions. We think, *I’ll get to Jesus. I’ll impress Jesus with who I am.*

I believe most people have a sense of inadequacy and failure

deep within themselves. No matter how hard they try or what they accomplish, they know they are in a dark place. They are short in a spiritual sense. They have sinned and come short of God's glorious standard. So they think, *I'll run faster, I'll run ahead, I'll find a tree and climb it, and I'll get God's attention.*

As if your running and your climbing is what gets God's attention!

That's not what saved Zacchaeus. It was God's mercy. It was God's grace. It was God's initiative.

We think God stops and takes notice of us because he sees us up in our cute sycamore trees. We think it is because we are so good. "See, I got God to notice. You see me? It's because I pray so loud, because I pray so much, because I attend church."

But that's not why Jesus stopped that day. He stopped of his own choosing. He stopped because he's gracious and he's good. He stopped because he knew Zacchaeus by name, just as he knows me and knows you.

Jesus told Zacchaeus to hurry, and he tells us the same thing. "Hurry down from religion. Hurry down from traditions. Quit trying to pick yourself up. Only my grace can save you. Come down, and come now. Don't spend another moment or another day trusting yourself. I need to be with you today."

While Zacchaeus spoke, Jesus must have been smiling to himself. But now he makes an announcement of his own. "Today, salvation has come to this house. Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham, a true Jew."

Zacchaeus is stunned. He is the quintessential traitor, the bad guy, the antithesis of a good Jew. For as long as he can remember, he's been on the outside looking in. Now he's on the inside? Now he's a good guy?

I wish I could have seen the look on his friends' faces. *If there's hope for Zacchaeus, there must be hope for me too!*

Then Jesus summed up his life mission: "I'm here to find and help lost people. That's why I've come."

The Pharisees thought the Messiah was only coming for the chosen few, for the sanctified few, for the religious few. But Jesus said over and over that he came for the broken, the bad, the addicted, the bound, the deceived, the lost, the hurting.

Sometimes we are a lot like Zacchaeus. We've been at this sin thing for a long time. We have problems, weaknesses, and propensities toward doing wrong. We've gotten a little scarred and numb to the whole thing—maybe even outright cynical. We are helpless, hopeless. *Even Jesus couldn't set me free*, we think. After all, we've tried as hard as we can and nothing has changed. He wouldn't see anything worth saving in us anyway.

Maybe it's a secret sin: an affair eight years ago that not even your spouse knows about. Maybe it's something that controls your life, like alcoholism or some other addiction. People have told you you'll never change, and you're starting to believe them.

Jesus is not your accuser. He's not your prosecutor. He's not your judge. He's your friend and your rescuer. Like Zacchaeus, just spend time with Jesus. Don't hide from him in shame or reject him in self-righteousness. Don't allow the opinions of other people to shape your concept of him. Get to know him for yourself, and let the goodness of God change you from the inside out.