

# Nazareth

THE COMEDIAN

OFFERS SOMETHING TO SMILE ABOUT

OK, here's the story:  
a Jew, a Muslim and  
an evangelical Christian  
walk into a....

By Robert Mims





No, that's not the opening to yet another ethnic, cultures-at-a-crossroads genre joke. For Nazareth the Comedian, with his occasional real life "Peace Tour" appearances with fellow stand-up comics Bob Alpher—a Vermont rabbi—and Azhar Usman—a Chicago-born Muslim—it is all about humor...and how to respect other people and faiths while holding high his own commitment to Jesus Christ.

## Called From His Youth

"I grew up in a Greek Orthodox Palestinian family," says Nazareth Rizkallah, who was indeed born in and named for the predominantly Arab Holy Land town where Jesus grew up. "I used to think, *Hey, I'm a Christian; I'm Middle Eastern and my friends are not. God wants to use me for the purpose of diversity through comedy.*" (He recalls that he was making his friends and family members laugh at his antics when he was as young as age three.) "We are all created by Him," he continues, "and so many people—Muslims and Jews, everyone—need to hear the message of Jesus Christ."

In the arena of faith, so often charged with anger and distrust, Nazareth finds that humor is a disarming avenue to help people laugh, think and evaluate their relationships—with others and with their Creator.

Here's one example from the comic's joke chest: "We Middle Easterners are a lot like the Chinese and Latinos. We have extended families—they live with us. So...we have trouble answering the question on job applications about 'nearest relative not living with you.' The answer is 'none' because they all live with me."

And how about this observation on American public education: Nazareth tells audiences that while his children's school teaches abstaining from pre-marital sex, they also hand out condoms. "That is like a department store saying, 'Hey, no shoplifting—but just in case, here's a trench coat!'" he quips.

## The American Dream

Nazareth grew up in Palestine and Kuwait, but immigrated to the United States at age 19. He attended college in Toledo, Ohio. He says he grabbed the

"American Dream" with both hands, falling into a life of drugs, alcohol and immorality. A fateful night in 1990 at an "open mic" comedy club convinced him to give up a planned engineering career for show business. That lifestyle left him feeling increasingly empty, however.

"As a person at age 28, I was without hope," Nazareth says, "...until I decided to take my faith seriously. I'm glad for that emptiness; because of it, I found the Lord." After accepting Christ, he literally cleaned up a once-profanity-laced act. Today, the 46-year-old funny man often follows his performances by giving his testimony or giving biblical teachings that use his sense of humor as spiritual seasoning.

Nazareth's career has taken him to venues ranging from church auditoriums to prison death rows, from the *Grand Ole Opry* stage to appearances on TV's *700 Club*, *Comedy Central* and *NBC Nightly News* and to tours with the Temptations and the Righteous Brothers.

Although that is a lot to be proud of, Nazareth says he takes the most joy in being a husband to his wife, Maha and father to their three children. "Because of them, I am a happy man," he says. He and his family live in Southern California.

## A Word of Encouragement

As his interview with *Christian Living* drew to a close, Nazareth had something special to say to his fellow Americans. Instead of offering another joke, he grew serious and said, "Noting our current times of economic stress and uncertainty, I want to encourage people that God is faithful, and that they should not worry or be afraid. As believers in Christ, we should not operate out of fear."

Now, that's something to smile about!

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To learn more about Nazareth the Comedian and his upcoming shows, please visit his web site at [www.nazarethusa.com](http://www.nazarethusa.com).

