

# **A Season of Joy: HUMOR**

**Genesis 21:1-7  
Luke 10:17-21**

*Christians are people of good humor.*

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My dad may have invented “dad jokes.” If he didn’t, he was a master of the genre. They used to be called bad jokes, but not too long ago, someone decided they were the particular production and possession of dads, so they became known as “dad jokes.” They are usually puns, normally clean, and elicit groans from your kids. My dad passed them on to me, and I tried as best I could to pass them on to my sons. I know I succeeded with my younger son, because when he cracks one, his wife refers to it as a “Bud joke.” They even got me a coffee mug that says “Dad jokes served fresh daily.”

One of my dad’s favorites was about the guy who went to prison. He was quite nervous, of course, but the first night, as he lay in his bunk, he heard the other inmates doing a strange thing. Someone would call out a number, and everyone would laugh. Then another number, followed by laughter. Then another and another. Eventually, the new prisoner drifted off to sleep.

The next day, he asked another inmate at breakfast, “What was going on last night with the numbers and the laughter?” The prisoner replied, “We’ve been in here so long we know everybody’s jokes, so we just assigned them a number. When someone says a number, we all remember the joke, and we laugh.”

That night, as he lay in his bunk, the numbers and the laughter started again. Not knowing the jokes, but wanting to fit in, the new prisoner called out, “17!” Crickets. Dead silence. Nobody laughed.

The next morning, the new prisoner asked his buddy, “What happened last night? I called out a number, and nobody laughed.”

“Oh, well, you know,” the other prisoner replied, “Some people just can’t tell a joke.” Thanks, dad.

We’re preaching “A Season of Joy,” based on *The Book of Joy*, about a week of conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Each sermon we will examine an impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy. The pillar of joy

today is Humor, but before we go there, we want to consider the opposite emotion. Sadness and grief are a direct impediment to joy. How can we be joyful if our hearts are full of sadness and grief?

Nevertheless, they are. We all feel sadness and grief regularly, if not constantly. These emotions are part of life. The Bible witnesses to sadness and grief throughout the story, but especially in the Psalms. Over half the Psalms are psalms of lament, expressing sadness and grief, like Psalm 6: “*I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief; they grow weak because of all my foes.*”<sup>1</sup> The Bible has a whole book called Lamentations.

We cannot deny such a strong, powerful and pervasive set of emotions. In fact, Archbishop Tutu said, “To hold down emotions ...is not wise. I would say go ahead and even maybe shout out your sadness and pain. This can bring you back to normal. It’s locking them up and pretending that they are not there that causes them to fester and become a wound.”<sup>2</sup>

Sadness and grief are powerful, but they are not to be avoided. When they come, they can actually be a blessing in disguise. Studies have shown that people who are feeling sad have some advantages over people who are happy. They have better judgment and memory; they are more sensitive and empathetic; they are more generous toward others. In fact, most of us have experienced the bonding relationships that happen when we share sadness or grief with another person. The Archbishop had a great observation: “We don’t really get close to others if our relationship is made up of unending hunky-doriness. It is the hard times, the painful times, the sadness and the grief that knit us more closely together.”<sup>3</sup>

We don’t want to be sad or experience grief. We want joy. But when we do experience sadness and grief—and it will come to us without our solicitation—we can use those negative emotions for something positive: to grow as a person, to deepen our spirits, to build our relationships. We all have that experience, so we know that on the path of sadness and grief, we are never alone.

The Dalai Lama shared a Buddhist story in the book about a woman who lost a child and was inconsolable in her grief. She carried the dead child around, begging for someone to help heal her child. Finally, she came to a monk, who told her he could help her, if she would go get some mustard seeds for the medicine. However, the monk told the mother that the mustard seeds must come from a home that had never known death. The woman searched and searched. Every home had mustard seeds, but no home had been without the experience of losing a grandparent, parent, spouse, or a child. Realizing that she was not unique in her loss, the woman was able to bury her child in the forest and release her grief.<sup>4</sup>

Sadness and grief are an impediment to joy, but the pillar of joy we want to examine today is HUMOR. When sadness and grief pass, we can laugh again. Both the Dalai Lama and the Archbishop had known many days of sadness and grief, but they both were/are delightful, happy people. In their week of conversations, they were always laughing, kidding around, and telling funny stories. Constant frowning is exhausting; a spirit of lightheartedness is relaxing and energizing. The Dalai Lama said, “It is much better when there is not too much seriousness. Laughter, joking is much better. Then we can be completely relaxed.”<sup>5</sup>

We don’t often think of the Bible as a funny book, but there is humor to be found if you look for it. The story of the events leading up to the birth of Isaac had lots of laughter

in it. Abraham was 99 years old. Sarah, his wife was 90. She had never had children, so she had given her slave Hagar to Abraham, and through her he had a son Ishmael. Biblical marriage, right? But then the Lord told Abraham that Sarah was going to bear a child as well. And the Scripture says, "*Abraham fell on his face and laughed.*"<sup>6</sup> Not a cynical smile, not a polite chuckle, but a loud, lose-your-balance, tears-in-your-eyes holler!

Later, an angel came and told Abraham that the time had arrived for Sarah to get pregnant. This time, Sarah heard them talking, and she also laughed at the idea: "*After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?*"<sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord heard Sarah laughing, and he said, "Why did you laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" And Sarah said, "I didn't laugh." And the angel said, "Oh yes, you did." Who argues with the angel of the Lord?

Finally, what the Lord predicted happened. Sarah got pregnant and had a baby, a boy named Isaac, which means—what else? "Laughter." Sarah said, "*God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.*"<sup>8</sup> Old Testament humor.

I think Jesus had a sense of humor as well. He often inserted humor into his parables, giving absurd examples in his stories, not all of which translate well into English. I can just imagine Jesus laughing at some of the things that happened, like when the disciples returned in Luke after going out and ministering in the country around Galilee. They came back and reported to Jesus that even the demons had submitted to their authority in his name. I imagine Jesus throwing back his head and laughing as he said, "*I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. Indeed, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.*"<sup>9</sup> At that happy moment, the Scripture says that Jesus was filled with joy. "*At that very hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to [these little babies]; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.'*"<sup>10</sup>

Often there is a fine line between humor and grief. Once Jesus was called to the home of Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, whose daughter was dying. When he arrived, he found people weeping, because the girl had died. Jesus announced that the girl was not dead; she was only sleeping. And they all laughed at Jesus.

Many times at funerals, we will try to tell appropriately humorous stories about the deceased. It just seems to relax the whole room. Archbishop Tutu had to preside over many funerals that were fraught with anger and rage because the dead person (or many people) had been murdered. He still tried to inject humor into a horrible situation to bring healing to their grief.

When Jesus himself died, the women came in grief to his tomb on the third day. They discovered that the body of Jesus was not there; he had risen! And the Scripture says they ran away from the tomb filled with fear and joy. The two can be very close.

I heard a joke this week about aliens visiting the earth. They happened to land next to a church, and the preacher came out to greet them. They said, "How are you doing?" Obviously being English-speaking aliens. The preacher said, "Fine, how are you?" And the aliens said, "We're great! We just had our annual visit from Jesus."

The preacher said, "Annual visit from Jesu! What do you mean?"

The alien said, “Yes, every year Jesus comes back to see us. He heals a few people, raises a few from the dead, and tells us some new stories. It’s great.”

The preacher said, “That amazing! We’ve been waiting 2,000 years for Jesus to return. How did you get him to do that?”

The alien said, “Oh, it’s probably the chocolate. The first time he came, we gave him chocolate. Jesus loves chocolate, so he comes back every year. Why? What did you give him when he first came to you?”

*The Book of Joy* recommends three rules of good humor. Christians should be people of good humor. So follow these rules:

1. Don’t take yourself so seriously. Laugh at yourself. Self-deprecating humor also helps with humility.

2. Use humor to build people up, not to tear people down. Humor can be mean and sarcastic. That kind of humor does not lead to joy, only bitterness.

3. Positive humor builds trust. When you laugh *with* someone, not *at* them, not with bitterness, it creates a connection and strengthens the relationship. Tutu said, “Yes, the Dalai Lama and I tease each other, but it is a statement of trust in the relationship. It’s an indication that there’s enough of a reservoir of good will that you’re really saying, ‘I trust you. And you trust me that I know you will not undermine me or be offended by me.’”<sup>11</sup>

The practice of joy this week follows closely on these three rules. Joy comes when you practice humor, particularly self-deprecating humor. So:

1. Know yourself. Be self-aware enough that you know what is funny about you. Know all the silly, quirky, stupid things about you that are funny. Remember all the funny things that have happened to you; you may want to share them at some point.

2. Laugh at yourself. Be humble and vulnerable enough to laugh when something funny happens to you or you do something a little foolish. If you knock yourself down first, it’s unlikely that anyone else is going to try to knock you down.

3. And finally, laugh at life. Don’t take everything so seriously. Look for the funny, the ironic, the absurd in life. Watch a humorous show or movie or comedian.

We don’t have to take everything so seriously because we don’t have to fix everything. The world and life and time still belong to God, and God is still in charge. Even if we don’t see the positive resolution of all things, God does. And God will make it happen; you can trust in that. So laugh it off.

The Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu walk into a bar. There at the bar is a bear eating dinner. The bear is black and white with dark circles around his eyes. When the bear gets through eating, he pulls out a pistol, fires it into the air, and stomps out the door. Everybody ducks, of course, but when they stand back up, Desmond Tutu says to the Dalai Lama, “What was that?”

The Dalai Lama says, “I know this one! That was a Chinese panda.”

Tutu says, “That couldn’t be a Chinese panda. We are nowhere near China.”

The Dalai Lama whips out his phone and says, “Is too! Look, Wikipedia says, ‘Chinese panda—eats shoots and leaves.’”

Had to leave you with a dad joke.

Here are your takeaways for today:

1. Don’t let sadness and grief be an impediment to your joy. Don’t deny your feelings, but instead, use sadness and grief to get at the deep parts of life and relationships.

2. Seek joy through humor. The world is a funny place. You are a funny person. Don't take things so seriously that you can't see the humor in yourself and in your life. God wants you to have joy, because as Nehemiah said, "*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*"<sup>12</sup> Live in that strength today.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 6:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Abrams, The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, *The Book Of Joy: Lasting Happiness In A Changing World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016), 109f.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 112f.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 17:17.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 18:12.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 21:6.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 10:18-20.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:21.

<sup>11</sup> *The Book Of Joy*, 220.

<sup>12</sup> Nehemiah 8:10.