

"FOR LAUGHING OUT LOUD!"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION It's true, isn't it, that we laugh for different reasons. Sometimes we laugh out of embarrassment. Sometimes we laugh because something is really clever and witty. Then, too, there may be times when we laugh in order to cover up our despair or disappointment.

I came across a story recently about a man who awoke one morning to find a puddle of water in the middle of his "king-size" water bed. In order to fix the puncture, he managed to roll the heavy mattress outdoors and filled it with more water so he could locate the leak. He soon found he had little control over this enormous bag of water and it began to roll around on the hilly terrain. Trying to hold it back, it soon headed downhill and rolled into a clump of bushes which poked it full of small holes.

Somewhat disgusted, he got rid of the water bed and brought in a standard bed into his room. But the next morning he woke up to find a puddle of water once again in the middle of his new bed. Upon further exploration, he found that the upstairs bathroom had a leaky drain and that was the source of his problem. What do you do at a time like that? A few years from now, he may be able to look back on it and find it funny and laugh over it. I think I would.

DEVELOPMENT Yes, there are all kinds of reasons to laugh. Did you know that there's a man written up in the Bible who got his name because his mother laughed at an inappropriate time. Let me tell you about the incident.

The story began one hot summer afternoon. The temperature was well up in the high nineties. The only relief was the shade of a tree. It was really too hot to do much of anything. The unbearable heat dulled the senses and clouded the eyes and clogged the ears. It was so hot that a haze could be seen rising from the desert. And this is why Abraham was startled to see three visitors coming toward him. It was as if these strangers had appeared from out of nowhere.

When Abraham saw the visitors approaching, he jumped up from the table and ran out to meet them and bowed down before them and welcomed them graciously in to his home. Hospitality back in Biblical times was important....almost a sacred obligation. Even if the stranger was a member of a hostile tribe, hospitality was offered and so we find Abraham inviting these three travelers to stay with him. And He and his wife, Sarah, did all they could to take care of these guests who had appeared at their front door.

GOD HAS A PLAN FOR EACH OF US This brings us to the first thing I would introduce into your thinking. I would like to believe that God has a plan for each of us.

He certainly had a plan for Abraham. He called him to leave his home to father a new people. God promised him that he would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. There was only one problem. Abraham and Sarah had no children. He was getting up there in years, an old man, 99 years old. His best years were behind him and his wife, Sarah, was well past child-bearing age. Her biological clock had long stopped ticking. How could it be that he and Sarah would produce children. Abraham put a question to God, asking Him,

"Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old?"

In fact, all of this seemed so absurd that Abraham fell to the ground - laughing. What God had promised seemed impossible to him. Couples well into their nineties just don't have children. But we discover in the pages of the Bible that God often calls people and is able to use people of all ages in some magnificent way. We are never too old or too young to be used by God in some wonderful way.

Charles Kuralt tells a story that I share with you. As you know, he travels across the United States often meeting some very interesting people. He tells about an old man that he met one time in Kansas whose name he did not catch, but that's not important in the sharing of the story. This old timer was a pilot. Charles Kuralt and his crew were doing a story about an artist whose canvases were eighty-acre fields. The best way to view this unusual art work was from a plane. Kuralt and his photographer spotted an old J-2 Piper Cub parked in a barnyard. They asked this old farmer if he would fly them and he replied,

"Sure...I'll take you up...glad to do it". The photographer told the farmer that they would need to take the door off so he could take some pictures. "No problem...fine" said farmer. And so they took off.

Flying at 2000 feet, the photographer asked the old pilot,

"How long ago did you get your ticket?" "Ticket?" responded the farmer. "You know...your pilot's license" said the photographer as he edged to the door to get his camera in a good position.

"I don't have any pilot's license" the old farmer said. "I just found this thing wrecked out here and patched it up the best I could and taught myself to fly it."

It's never too late to learn, to grow, to have some new experiences. We don't know what tomorrow may bring, but we can take faith in the fact that God does have a plan for each of us. And we're called to get up and "fly" a bit in life. Put that down as the first point of this "three-pointer".

WITH GOD ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE

The second thing is that with God all things are possible.

These three unexpected visitors to Abraham's home that day confirmed what God had previously told Abraham. Yes, he and Sarah would become parents in their old age. Sarah was in the tent listening to what was being said, catching every word. She had the same reaction as Abraham. She laughed. Well, Sarah and Abraham were about to discover that nothing is impossible for God. He had a plan for them, just as He has a plan for each of us.

Some time back a boy was born into poverty in a rundown section of San Francisco. He grew up as a great fan of that football legend, Jim Brown, who then was playing for the Cleveland Browns. This young boy, because of malnutrition, had some health problems. At the age of six we're told that his legs had become permanently bowed and his calves so wasted that his nickname was "Pencil Legs". But he set a goal to one day become a star running back like his hero, Jim Brown. There's more to the story of "Pencil Legs".

He had no money to attend football games, so whenever the Browns played the Forty-Niners, he would sit and wait outside the stadium until the maintenance crew opened the gate late in the 4th quarter. Then he would hobble into the stadium to watch the last minutes of the game.

One day at the age of 13, Pencil Legs walked into an ice cream parlor after a game and discovered much to his amazement that his long-time idol, Jim Brown, was there. He approached the football star and said to him, "Mr. Brown...I'm your biggest fan!" Graciously, Jim Brown thanked him and tried to go back to eating his ice cream, but the young boy persisted,

"Mr. Brown....you know what?" Patiently, Jim Brown said, "What is it, son?" The boy replied, "I know every record you've set, and every touchdown you've ever scored!" Mr. Brown smiled and said something like, "That's great" and returned to his conversation and ice cream. The boy persisted, "Mr. Brown....Mr. Brown....." Jim Brown was now getting a bit annoyed but turned in his direction once again. The boy looked him in the eyes and said with determination, "Mr. Brown, one day I'm going to break every one of your records." The football legend smiled and said, "That's great kid, what's your name?"

The boy grinned and answered,

"Orenthal, sir. Orenthal James Simpson. My friends all call me O. J."

O. J. Simpson did indeed go on to break all of Jim Brown's records and set some new ones of his own. I always think of this story whenever I see OJ doing the Hertz "rent-a-car" add on TV. We do live in a world of infinite possibilities. And that's the point I'm trying to get across to you.

Abraham and Sarah would have a son just as God had said, and just as the divine visitors had now confirmed.

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

Here's the last thing to be said. God does keep His promises.

Sarah laughed when the announcement was made of her impending pregnancy. But God asked,

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" The next Spring Isaac was born. "The Lord did for Sarah just as He had promised."

I like this story taken from Dimensions for Living and hope it speaks to you as well. It's about a woman by the name of Nellia Garber who was given a Bible by her husband and she shared it with her growing son, Doug. They would often read the Bible together and underline different passages, lines that spoke of God's promises. A few years later she received another Bible and gladly passed the first Bible on to Doug, her son, who treasured it.

The years went by. Doug got married and had three sons of his own. It was a happy home and family until one day tragedy struck. Their house caught fire and burned to the ground.

The lost everything. For a week, neighbors and family and friends all reached out, trying to help them. They supplied clothes, money, food, furniture and even offered prayers. The one day Doug's wife visited her mother in law. Smiling she said to her, "Look, mother, what I found in the rubble." It was their old Bible. The Bible was soaking wet, its leather cover somewhat shriveled and brittle, but with all the pages still intact. Nellia began to dry it off, first with a towel, then in the oven. When her son, Doug, came home that night Nellia handed him the Bible saying excitedly, "Doug...open it up. Let it fall open."

The Bible opened up and Doug read a verse that they had underlined many years before. It was from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah. He read,

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and
the flame shall not consume you"

Yes, God keeps His promises. Somehow it reminds me of that beautiful line which is a favorite of mine, "Coincidence is God's way of keeping His anonymity".

Back to the Bible story. Isaac was born. His name means laughter. This son would always remind his mother and his father of their disbelief and of God's faithfulness. "I believe, Lord. Help my unbelief". God can be trusted. Over in the New Testament, in the fourth chapter of Romans, we find St. Paul praising Abraham for his faith, but if we were to ask Abraham, I think...I would believe that Abraham would praise God for His faithfulness.

CLOSING My Sunday morning usually begins by listening to Robert Schuller on Channel Five. He shared a story with his listening audience that I felt was worth getting a hold of. It's taken from his book, Life's Not Fair But God is Good. It's a real life story that music lovers will appreciate.

It's about Ana Maria Trenchi De Bottazi, a child prodigy. Her name was new to me and I had to check with Dr. Woodside to make sure I was pronouncing it correctly. She began studying piano at the tender age of two and gave her first piano recital in her native Argentina at the age of four. In the years that followed, she gave many recitals and by the time she was eighteen, she had given recitals - both solo and with orchestras - throughout South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. At the age of twenty-three, she was a full professor for graduate piano students at the Kunatachi University in Tokyo.

One day tragedy struck and she was nearly killed in an automobile accident. The doctors were honest and said that the damage to her brain was quite extensive. They told her she would never play the piano again. For years to come she could not do anything, she said, describing her long recovery. Fifteen blood clots were removed from her brain by the doctors and she lost her coordination. She couldn't even lift up a plate.

During those difficult years of attempted recovery, her mother would tell her over and over again that,

"What we are is God's gift to us. What we become is our
gift to God."

God doesn't make mistakes, her mother often said. Ana began to believe in herself

once again. She even began to imagine herself playing at Carnegie Hall. In her imagination she saw the people giving her a standing ovation.

After a long sixteen year period, she one day finally did walk out on the stage of Carnegie Hall and she was terrified. She quietly sat down at the piano and prayed. She asked God to help her. She then proceeded to play the piano for two hours. She was totally immersed in the music and when she finally finished her last piece of music, she turned to face the audience. Two thousand people were clapping...giving her a standing ovation. She said that for a second she wasn't even sure it was really happening. It was just as she had dreamed. And when she realized it was real, she broke down and cried on the stage. As she took her bow, she offered another prayer, whispering...

"God...this is my gift to you...."

Since that day she has given ten more concerts in Carnegie Hall. She has also played for government leaders and dignitaries throughout the world. Not bad for a woman who was told she would never play the piano again.

Back to Abraham. God said to Abraham, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" The answer, of course, is a loud "no"! God has a plan for each of us. Nothing is impossible for God. God always keeps His promises. It's enough to want to make you laugh out loud for joy.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and presence in these moments. Lift our spirits and remind us that with You all things indeed are possible. Send us out of here with a song in our hearts...with peace, with love, with deep joy in our hearts. In the name and spirit of Christ, the life-giver, we now pray. Amen