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SAMSON, COMEDIAN

Some people say I am quite a wit. Others say they are half right. Half-wit or not, there are certain passages of scripture that I think are exceptionally humorous. For instance, in Acts 8 when an angel helps Peter escape from prison, I think it hilarious that Rhoda leaves him at the front door after she recognizes him. Just as funny is that the Christians praying for his release hear that he is at the door and their reaction is, "You must be joking." But then, I also think it funny that, in Genesis 18, Abraham is sitting in his tent with God and when he sees men coming he essentially tells God, "Wait for me here; I'll get back to you as soon as I take care of these guys."

If I consider those events funny, imagine what I think about Samson (Judges 13-16). Yes, his humor is often a little strange, even cruel at times. Still, he was a master of wit.

Whenever I give a present I often accompany it with a "clue" about what is in the wrapping. These clues are designed to conceal rather than reveal. My father was the supreme master of this. His classic clue was, "It is loud and it is quiet; it is round and it is square; it is hard and it is soft; it is big and it is little." He went on for several days with such clues before we eventually found that he was describing a Ping-Pong (table tennis) table and equipment. Perhaps my dad and I are descended from Samson. In Judges 14 Samson is at a party and presents a riddle. "Out of the eater came forth meat; and out of the strong came forth sweet." This riddle made no sense to anyone who had not known (as nobody did) that he had killed a lion and bees made a hive in the carcass. It was a perfectly good riddle. The wicked wit is that it was unsolvable to anybody but Samson. My kind of guy.

As God intended, the Philistines were the usual targets of Samson's humor. To pay a debt of thirty garments he went to another town and killed thirty Philistines for their clothes. When trapped in a city at night he took the huge gate, with its doorposts and the bar used to lock it, and carried it to Hebron, 94 miles away. What a way to tell somebody that their gate is useless to hold him! On another occasion his father-in-law thought Samson had deserted his wife, so he gave his daughter to

Samson's best man instead. When Samson learned of this he burned the Philistine crops in a unique way. Catching 300 foxes, he tied their tails together in pairs and attached burning torches. Imagine a videotape of that. Pairs of foxes running every which way, trying to get away from the fire, but getting in each other's way because they are tied together. It was cruel, yet an effective way of saying, "sly as you are, I am even more so."

There was a time when the Jews were upset with Samson for upsetting the status quo. They wanted to turn him over to the Philistine army. They bound him with new ropes, but when he came to the army he burst them like burnt thread. When his new girlfriend, Delilah, asked how to take his strength he told her to bind him with strips of bark, and then with new ropes. By now Delilah should have known he was playing with her. If new ropes had not worked before, he must be joking with her now. If his joke with the foxes was cruel, this was even more so. Nobody ever said Samson was smart, but even he should have figured out that these jokes were putting his girlfriend in danger, especially since these were the same people who burned his first wife to death. I grant that this was not the best situation in which to play a joke, but it must have been fun pretending to be weak and then watching the men scatter when he freed himself.

So Samson's brand of humor may not have been the same as some people's. Nevertheless, he does show that God doesn't expect all of his people to be unsmiling Puritans. Our jokes should not be as cruel as Samson's, but God's people can joke around. In his word God tells us about some funny events. It is acceptable to laugh when reading the Bible. It might even do you some good.

CONTENTS

Samson, Comedian	1
It's Impossible	2
In What Guise?	4

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IT'S IMPOSSIBLE

I always liked Perry Como. Mr. C had such a smooth voice, and an easy style. He did not rely on gimmicks or flashiness. I guess some people might have said his sweater was a gimmick, but it was more just a trademark. He had a string of hits over many years. One of his biggest hits in his later years started out saying "it's impossible." He listed such impossibilities as the sun leaving the sky or a baby not crying. (Obviously he didn't believe "Away In a Manger" when it says Jesus did not cry as a baby.) The Bible also lists a number of things that are impossible, and a few possibilities.

If it were possible

The Bible also talks about things that might be tried, as if they were possible. The usual implication of the phrase is that the thing discussed is really not a possibility, even though someone thinks it might be. Sometimes,

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however, it merely suggests that there might be barriers to a normal occurrence.

For instance, Paul once hurried on a trip, bypassing Ephesus and the other churches in Asia Minor, "if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the day of Pentecost." (Acts 20:16) As a Jew, even though a Christian, he was hoping the same thing that most Jews today hope. He wanted to be in Jerusalem for the holiday. He knew that a delay would prevent him from fulfilling his obligation. In fact, there was the possibility that even without a delay he might be late.

The captain of the ship that was taking Paul to Rome was also hoping that there would be no barriers to something he was normally able to do. The ship was in a tempest, and approaching landfall. "And when it was day, they knew not the land: but they discovered a certain creek with a shore, into the which they were minded, if it were possible, to thrust in the ship." (Acts 27:39) In this hope he was frustrated, however, when the ship stuck fast aground and broke apart. Sometimes the possibilities are realized, and sometimes not.

Sometimes we need to try our best to make the thing possible. Paul says that sometimes it just depends on us for something to be possible. "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

(Romans 12:18) There is a slight admission here that some things might not always be possible. What Paul says, however, is that we are not to be the barrier to the possibility. We may not be able, in this instance, to live at peace with others, simply because they may not wish peace with us. Nevertheless, we should try. If they choose to ignore our attempts at peace, at least it is not our fault. We can't always control others. Paul insists that we control ourselves.

In the first category, things that are not possible but hoped for, Jesus classified deceiving God's people. "For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect." (Matt 24:24; Mark 13:22) A careful look at what Jesus is saying shows that "the elect" in this passage is probably the Jewish people, or at least those who are devout in their study of the Law and the Prophets. Whoever it may be, Jesus is clearly saying that those who are familiar with the word of God will not allow themselves to be deceived by false Christs and false prophets. The Qur'an calls the Jews and Christians "people of the Book." Unfortunately, over the years there are many in both groups that have failed to live up to that sobriquet. We have lost contact with the Book, and the impossible has happened. Many are deceived. Some have been so deceived by false messiahs that they have lost faith in any Messiah at all. Others will accept any prophet that claims to have the Spirit, or has a new revelation. Some are deceived by signs. Even though speaking in unintelligible syllables is common to almost every world religion, almost every one thinks that it is only their religion that has a monopoly on speaking the hidden words of God. They take the incomprehensible as the inspired. Because what can be self-generated appears to be a sign, many are deceived by it. Paul warns not to allow false signs to make an impossibility a fact. "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." (Gal 1:8-9)

Sometimes, though, hoping for the impossible can be a good thing. Such was the case with the Galatians. They wished they could have done the impossible, out of their love for Paul. "I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me." (Gal 4:15) Wishing we could do the impossible sometimes may be a sign of our love. Even though we know it cannot happen, we wish it could.

The possible

Some people wish some things were possible. The Bible talks of things that truly are possible.

Faith makes the improbable possible. In Rogers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, the Fairy Godmother sings, "Impossible things are happening every day." Jesus agrees that such might be true. Who ever heard of thinking a mountain from one place to another? Yet Jesus says it is possible. "Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you." (Matt 17:20) Although Jesus uses the word "impossible" here, he negates it, making it into a possibility. Some people think this is a case of hyperbole to make a point. They say Jesus didn't really mean we could literally move mountains. This is a remote possibility. What is more likely, though, is that Jesus is telling the truth, and those naysayers just don't have the faith about which he speaks. After all, the context in which he makes this statement is that of casting out demons. This was something they had just seen him do, even though it seemed impossible. It is likely, then, that he is using the possibility they had just seen to reinforce a possibility they had not. "All things are possible to him that believeth." (Mk 9:23)

Perhaps the best known passages on possibility are those that talk about God. "With God all things are possible." (Mk 10:27; Matt 19:26) This is the creator of the world. If it is possible to make something where there was nothing, anything else is possible. That doesn't mean that God necessarily always does that which is possible. We know of at least one case where he chose not to follow through on a possibility, and are blessed thereby. In Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was betrayed, he prayed to God, saying, "O my Father, if it be possible, and all things are possible unto thee, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt." (Matt 26:39 combined with Mk 14:36) It was possible for God to stop his plan before Jesus was betrayed. Although it was possible, it was not the right thing to do. Had God done the possible, all of us could not be reconciled to God. Sometimes following through on a possibility creates an impossibility. As Paul put it, "All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient." (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23) Even though it is possible, it may not be the best thing.

Impossible

Just as there is the seeming paradox of God choosing not to do the possible so as not to create an impossibility, so also there is the seeming paradox of everything being possible for God and yet some things being impossible for him. God can do anything except choose to violate his very nature. "Wherein God, willing

more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us." (Heb 16:17-18) Although everything is possible with God, he cannot lie. It is impossible for God not to love. And it is impossible for God to perform a logical contradiction such as creating a rock too big for him to lift.

Peter said there was an impossibility in relation to Jesus after his death, as well. "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it." (Acts 2:23-24) Once Jesus had died, it was impossible for him to remain in the grave. Paul says the resurrection is as much a part of the gospel as the death and burial. For there to be the good news of salvation it was impossible that death could hold Jesus.

More often, though, it is we who are faced with impossibilities. "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." (Heb 10:4) "But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that

What is possible may not always be right.

cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." (Heb 11:6) "It is impossible that offences will not come." (Lk 17:1)

Perhaps the most argued passage on impossibility is Hebrews 6:4-6. What you believe it says depends a lot on whether or not you believe in the doctrines of John Calvin.

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame.

For many who oppose Calvinist doctrines, this passage says two things. One is that it is possible to fall from grace. The other is that the impossibility of restoring someone is a conditional impossibility. The usual interpretation is that it means that it is impossible for a person who has been convinced that Jesus is Savior to renew them to repentance using the same arguments. This seems to fit the context, and the mercy of God. For that is another impossibility; for God not to be merciful.

IN WHAT GUISE?

His eyes glow. He comes in dreams and sits on your heart to crush the life out of you. He has the most evil grin. He is red, has a tail, and carries a pitchfork. These are various people's depictions of Satan. People ask if their dreams of terror were sent by the devil to intimidate Christians. They wonder if people may be Satan or his agents because of an evil look or a conversation that kept the person from reading about Jesus. All of these things belie a misunderstanding of the truth about Satan.

It must be understood that the devil has power. It must be understood that the devil wants as many souls to follow him as possible. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour." (1 Pet 5:8) Nevertheless, Satan would not appear like those things described above.

It must be also understood that the devil's power is limited. "And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him." (Rev 20:2) Because he has been bound by the crucifixion of Jesus, the shedding of blood for sin, his power is limited. We are his masters, and he has to obey. If he comes to tempt us to sin, all we have to do is tell him to leave and he has to do so. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (Jas 4:7)

Keeping those two points in mind, the devil would certainly not be seen as some portray him. Face the facts. If you could recognize the devil for who he is, would you follow him? If he had red tail and carried a pitchfork, wouldn't you know him and refuse to believe his lies? If he came to you in a dream and tried to smother you, would that induce you to follow him or

to fight him? I'm sure he would love for people to think that he appears in these ways, because then they will be off their guard when he does come before them. The evil or strange-looking persona just works in his favor, because that is not how he really appears.

"Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor 11:14) The greatest of all baseball musicals, Damn Yankees, came close to the truth. Satan looked like a player's agent. (Of course, some owners might believe that Scott Boras *is* the devil personified during negotiations over multimillion dollar contracts.) Some Hollywood movies of the Fifties thought it might be interesting if the devil were portrayed as a businessman in a three-piece suit. Little did they know how accurate they probably were! Satan is going to come to us in a guise that is pleasing and reassuring. He wants us to trust him, or at least not to reject him outright. After all, he wants us to do what he wants us to do. How will we do that if we are repulsed by him?

So how would we recognize him? Most often he comes to you looking like yourself. No, not in another body that looks like you, but in your own body. "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death." (Jas 1:14-15) He makes you think "it's just natural," or "I was born that way." Sometimes he comes as our friends, exerting peer pressure. Even so, he isn't hard to recognize, if you know what to look for. Just look for someone who wants you to follow them into sin. Of course, that means you have to know what sin is; and for that you have to study the word of God. Only then can you recognize Satan and his ways. Then you will be ready for him. Ready to resist.

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