

WHY NO SMILING IN THE 'OLDEN DAYS'?

By Jim Mathis

As an expert on old photographs, I am often asked why people were not smiling in old photos. There are actually three theories. The first is that shutter speeds for cameras in photography's early days were long due to slow film speeds, so people had to hold still for a number of seconds. The second theory is that dental hygiene was not good, so people did not want to show unsightly teeth.

The first answer is somewhat true, but the second probably is not. There is a third possible explanation, most likely the real reason: To smile in a photograph was considered in poor taste. Here is a quote about that line of thinking from more than 300 years ago.

"There are some people who raise their upper lip so high...that their teeth are almost entirely visible. This is entirely contradictory to decorum, which forbids you to allow your teeth to be uncovered, since nature gave us lips to conceal them."

– Jean-Baptiste De La Salle, *The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*, 1703.

That is quite a statement. It sounds so contrary to our 21st century way of looking at the photographic grin. Thankfully, times change as so do styles of photography. Now it is rare, particularly in Western cultures, to see a photo of someone not smiling – especially if they want to look their best.

This led me to wonder what is it that most commonly makes people smile, whether a camera is present or not. Certainly good humor can prompt a smile; just try laughing without smiling. Your face might explode! We smile when we see people we care for; when babies and little animals do cute things; when we see a captivating piece of art; listen to a rousing musical performance; see our favorite team score at the end of the game to salvage victory from certain defeat; or receive a special surprise gift. We also smile when we receive a promotion at work, celebrate the formalizing of an important contract, or realize we have done something to enhance the life of another person.

Did you know the word "smile" does not appear in formal translations of the Scriptures? In a Bible concordance, it goes directly from "smelling" to "smite." Not a single "smile." That does not mean God is opposed to smiling. There is no mention of smiling, but words like "laugh," "laughing" and "laughter" are used 40 times. And we must assume if there was laughing going on, smiles were happening as well.

Laughing is not always presented in a happy way. Speaking about people conspiring to rebel against God, Psalm 2:4 states, *"The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."* Another time, however, laughter resulted in one of the biggest smiles in history. Sarah, the aging wife of Abraham, had given up hope of having a child. Then God promised them she would become a mother, and when their son, Isaac, was born, she said, *"God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me"* (Genesis 21:6). Isaac, in Hebrew, means "laughter" or "he who laughs."

Most often the Bible speaks of joy, which we might consider "smiling on the inside," even when things happening around us are unpleasant. James 1:3 says, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* So we can smile inwardly in adversity, trusting it will work for our ultimate good and help us to grow spiritually.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Do you have any old family photos in which no one is smiling? What were your thoughts about the lack of smiles?

2. What does a smile mean to you when you see it? What things most commonly will prompt you to smile?

3. Does it seem curious that the term "smile" is not used even once in the Bible, in the direct translations of the original manuscripts? Why do you think this is the case?

4. Can you think of any other instances of laughing in the Bible? If so, what are the circumstances – and is laughing used in a positive or negative manner? What would you think is the significance of this?

NOTE: If you would like to look at or discuss other portions of the Bible that relate to this topic, consider the following brief sampling of passages:

Psalm 1:1-3, 30:5, 100:1-5; Romans 5:2-5, 12:15; Philippians 4:4; Hebrews 12:2

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