

I can imagine someone reading this letter in English might also read, speak, and understand Swahili, or Spanish, French, Chinese, German, Portuguese, Icelandic, Norwegian, Russian, Afrikaans, etc. But it is unlikely that anyone reading this would know all of those languages. Remember the story of when humanity was unified, and they (we) decided to build something great? We used bricks to make a tower and we wanted to do it without God to make a name for ourselves. That is when God separated us from one another by creating the different languages. That story of the Tower of Babel is found in Genesis 9. After that, we spoke different languages and communication with each other was more difficult, but not impossible. There was **a form of communication that God did not change**, and it remains pretty much universal today. This language of facial expression is literally something we are all born with. A newborn infant has no trouble letting mom and dad know when it is upset! In fact, regardless of one's ethnicity, any human would be able to tell. Facial expressions seem to be designed into us.

but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard. So, Cain became very angry and his countenance fell. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen?" (Genesis 4:5-6)

"Countenance" is understood to mean facial expression. Charles Spurgeon was credited with saying, "When you speak of Heaven, let your face light up, let it be irradiated with a heavenly gleam, let your eyes shine with reflected glory. But when you speak of Hell—well, then your ordinary face will do."

A friend of mine made this observation: In a public space when there is a baby present, most of the time the adults that are paying attention to the baby are all smiling. There is something about **the innocence and purity of a baby that makes us smile**. That observation reminded me of this scripture:

[Messiah] said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3-4)

Maybe when we exhibit the innocence and humility that a baby has, God smiles at us.

There are many published studies that show how smiling and, by extension, laughter, are beneficial to us. These benefits include physical health improvements such as lowering one's stress level, anxiety, and blood pressure, increasing one's immune function, and improving one's homeostasis. There are psychological benefits such as making one feel happy; this is true for both the person smiling and whoever sees the smile! Laughter and smiling also provide an outlet for emotions. There are sociological benefits; people tend to have more trust in and are more attracted to people who are smiling. There is also evidence that **these benefits can come even if the smile is fake!** If you force yourself to smile when you are feeling down, you will likely improve your mood and feel better.

Bright eyes gladden the heart; Good news puts fat on the bones. (Proverbs 15:30)

A joyful heart makes a cheerful face, But when the heart is sad, the spirit is broken. (Proverbs 15:13)

Dr. Paul Ekman is a psychologist who has studied facial expressions for his entire career. I learned a lot about smiles from his website. From his research, he claims there are, and has categorized, dozens of different types of smiles. Most interestingly, a genuine smile will engage two circular muscles on the face that surround each eye. Often **one can tell if a smile is fake when the eyes are not "smiling."** Lately most of us have had some opportunity to experience people smiling with their mouth covered. Even

while wearing a mask, a smile can be perceived, received, and enjoyed. I think maybe part of what makes a person “photogenic” is that they are able to engage these eye muscles to create an authentic looking smile. This is one way to explain how **“the eyes are a window to our soul.”**

The scriptures also make it clear to us that God smiles. Since we are made in his image, it would only make perfect sense that we would share, relate to, and understand His “facial” expressions:

Make Your face shine on Your servant, and teach me Your Statutes. (Psalms 119:135)

Early in the book of Numbers, God was laying out the rules for and expectations of the Levites, Aaron, and the priesthood. At the end of chapter 6, God gives Moses a blessing to deliver to Aaron:

*Then the LORD spoke to Moses, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The LORD bless you, and keep you; The LORD make His face shine on you, And be gracious to you; **The LORD lift up His countenance on you, And give you peace.**' "So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them." (Numbers 6:22-27)*

Such a Blessing it is to have God smile on you. There is another smile that I want to look at here. That is the internal smile – it is like a secret of happiness that you have. This is the smile that you can carry with you no matter what happens. I have experienced this while working hard, maybe digging a hole in the ground. My expression is concentrated, my body is feeling discomfort from the exertion, my actions are focused on the job, but my mind may have been reminded of something joyful. I think of something that pulls me away from the physical situation and I smile in my mind. I feel my heart filled with peace and an ease of existence. That is a true blessing. **God smiles at me and fills my heart with gladness.**

Many are saying, "Who will show us any good?" Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O LORD! You have put gladness in my heart, More than when their grain and new wine abound. (Psalms 4:6-7)

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in prison, undoubtedly cold, hungry, and beaten. But they have an internal smile and they let some of it out in the form of song! They sing in their misery. They are able to smile in their suffering! Messiah, James, David and others understood this also:

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:12)

The LORD is my strength and my shield; My heart trusts in Him, and I am helped; Therefore my heart exults, And with my song I shall thank Him. (Psalms 28:7)

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

We also would do ourselves well to understand this... Practice your internal smile, but don't keep it inside always. It is most effective when it is freely and widely shared!

Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. (Colossians 3:2)

Peace to you and glory to God!

-Nate

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