

Transcript 171

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions Podcast. On today's episode joining me is Jeff Allen. He's a Christian comedian and author of the upcoming book *Are We There Yet?* It's an excellent book. I would highly encourage you to read it at the end of the episode, we'll have some links where you can purchase the book, and also be in the show notes, and also on when this video goes live on YouTube. So Jeff, welcome to the show.

Jeff Allen

Hey, thanks for having me. I can't. We can't do it without you guys, so I appreciate the opportunity.

Shea Houdmann

So Jeff, before we dive into the book, I wanted to ask you some questions about humor in general. Because we're a ministry that answers people's questions. Occasionally, we'll receive a question like sort along the lines of is it OK to laugh or what role should humor play in the Christian life? In your experience as a Christian comedian, does God have a sense of humor? Does God want us to laugh? Why did God? Why did God give us the ability to laugh as part of our design?

Jeff Allen

Well, you can certainly go to science on that one. For gosh sakes, the the healing benefits of laughter have been well documented. It releases endorphins, which is the body's natural morphine. So laughter is a painkiller. You know, if God designed us, he put us in, He put that in us for a reason. And I used to think about it when I first became a believer, I used to imagine the blessing and the curse it would be to be able to see the true nature of a person's heart. And you gotta think at some point, you know, when these disciples said to Jesus. Ohh, I'm with you Lord. I'm there. And he would just go, yeah, right. You know. I mean, yeah, OK, you know. So I I hope he has I? I'm sure he has his. I hope he has a sense of humor he has to. I mean, for gosh sakes. I mean, look at us, you know. And our promises and our yeah. I I don't know what I would do without the ability to laugh. I I really don't. I mean, through all of our hard times. You talk to anybody, I mean, I've been, I've been in recovery for 35 years. You talked to some of these horrific childhoods that these peoples had, the ones that make it out of it are the ones that can look back and laugh. You know, as a family you sit as a family.

Jeff Allen

We were sitting in my mother's Hospice. She was probably less than 12 hours from going to heaven, and we're on out there telling Mom stories and just laughing hysterically as a family. And the nurse came out and said, you know, not everybody's enjoying this, you know, you need to keep it down. But we knew our mom and we knew where she was going. We were securing that. And she had told us her, you know, goodbye, you know, and so just relaying and sitting and talking about her life and laughing at some of the things that were just wonderful. Helped us to deal with that moment in our life.

Jeff Allen

I'll give you a quick story. I was at my nephew's wedding probably three years after my mother passed. And my sisters, they really lost their best friend when my mom passed. We we. She was kind of the we we would, I'd call my mother twice, two or three times a week just to see how everybody else in the family was doing. I mean, I didn't have to call my siblings. I would just call Mom, cause everybody kept in touch with her. So anyway, my sisters were just extremely devastated at the loss of my mother. And I was at my nephew's wedding. I had my arm around my sister and I'm taking a picture with her. And right before the camera the, the, the photographers ready to take the picture, I leaned over and I said to Vicki, I said, you remember when mom was in Hospice and she was slipping into a coma. And Vicki says, I remember that. And I said we all went in to say her goodbyes and she said, I remember that. I said mom told me I was her favorite. And my sister that the cameraman got the the picture of her just laughing. And she said, well, she told me that too. I go well, she lied to you. I just didn't want you to get hurt.

Jeff Allen

But that, that's that's it's a blessing. I mean to be able to, you know, three years later it would, it wouldn't have been a joke I made the day after my Mother passed away. But that's the to me the out the other end part. And to laugh at my foibles in recovery rooms. When I got into recovery, you know, I was obviously you beat up, you're broken. You're just destroyed. And to listen to the laughter in those rooms at people talking about what they were like 10 years earlier, five years earlier. And the stupid. You know, there was a guy that told the story. I'll never forget this, that his wife would chain him, handcuffed him to a radiator on Friday night so he wouldn't drink and drive. So he'd sit in his chair, handcuffed to a radiator, forced to stay in his chair, had a little bucket that he went to the bathroom in and he would drink 1/5 of vodka. And he said I did that for eight months as if it was normal, you know. Not once did he think that was abnormal, you know, and you get again you get out the other end. That you look back and you go holy cow. That's insane. That's absolutely nuts. But at the time you're in it, it makes perfect sense. So if you can't laugh at that, you're you're going to be crushed, you know, by your own stupidity, you know. So anyway, that's I hope that answered the question.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, I agree 100% and sometimes you have to laugh just so you don't cry at some of the things you've experienced. And God definitely designed us in his image, so laughter is, like you said, it's healing. It's cathartic. It can help us to get over things not in like a dismissive or just forget about it, but like, really put it in perspective. And that's I love that about humor. Something you mentioned earlier, it's it's a question that I've actually had recently as the as a Christian comedian how do you know where to draw the lines in your humor? And not necessarily just in clean versus unclean humor, but some situations are not the appropriate times to make a joke. And they all know people who will tend to try to make a joke out of something that's really poorly timed. As a Christian comedian, as an expert on humor, how do we know when when's the appropriate time for humor and even how do we draw the lines appropriately?

Jeff Allen

Well, I'm not an expert on knowing where to draw the line. I've I've crossed the line a couple times now.

Shea Houdmann

As we all have.

Jeff Allen

And somebody told me when I, Mark Lowry a pretty well known comedian with the with Gaithers the Gaithers. When I started throwing with the Gaithers, Mark said something pretty profound. He said the key is to find the line and then kick it. And sometimes you'll miss the line of step over it. Now he had Bill to pull him back to make light of the fact that you know. But you acknowledge it if you cross the line. The audience will let you know when you cross the line. You know, Bill Cosby said something pretty profound. I can't tell you how to succeed, but I can tell you how to fail. And let's try to please everybody. I have a three rule. If I get 3 or 4 emails on a on a joke that from the same audience, I'll look at it and go well, maybe that was.

Jeff Allen

I remember I was at Estes Park years ago, I was a, you know, brand new believer and I got booked at this Christian music thing and they wanted some comedy to lighten things up. So anyway, there was a video on leprosy ministry and it was just this heart gut wrenching video on leprosy. I mean, it was like people were, you know, crying. And I want to put the the the producer of the event and leans over to me and he goes, you got to go up next we need to lighten up. And I go I'm not following leprosy. So anyway, I went up on stage and it was one of those times where you just say to yourself, well, I'll deliver a line and if it if it hits we're home. We'll keep going, and if it doesn't, I'm going to have to leave. And I said, you know, we were in Colorado and it was dry and whatever. And I said, well, my chapped lips just don't seem so bad right now. And you know, there was this pause and then everybody busted up laughing and there was you needed to break the tension. I mean there there it was kind of an unsaid thing that we need. We need to get past this. And again, I I thought at the time it probably crossed the line, but I'll let the audience make that decision and I'll just say it.

Jeff Allen

And again I I I, I make the distinction in today's culture because it seems to me there's this knee jerk to not only tell somebody they crossed the line, but to destroy their life for it. And my question is always to somebody, is their malice behind the joke? And if, if the intent is to malign and to cut somebody, then to me, that's inappropriate. But if it's pointing out an absurdity and you just happen to be part of the absurdity again, there's no malice. You know, when I started in comedy in 1978 in Chicago, we picked on every group there was, you know, but again, there was no malice. The audience determined that, you know, they knew if you were being malicious. And, you know, Blacks talked about whites, whites talked about, we grew up together, you know, and we were in those neighborhoods together. And the cultural differences were obvious. So you just pointed them out. I mean, again, nothing malicious about it. You know, I mean it was just part of everyday humor. It's what we talked about on the corners and we talked about in high school and we talked about wherever we ate, you know.

Jeff Allen

And then all of a sudden it just got it was almost like they were putting a kink into the hose of of humor. So we're, yeah, that's off topic that's off. You can't talk about that. You can't, you know. And. I sensed it with the drunk driving. I got sober and I was talking about drunk driving. I mean, I used to drive drunk, you know? And I'm not proud of that. But again, healing is being able to look back at the folly of your life. And it was killing just killing and then all of a sudden there wasn't. The culture decided that it wasn't

good to make light of that. Yeah. And so anyway, I go with the, I go with the audience. I mean, I'm not there to bludgeon them over the head with stuff they don't want to hear. But it was disappointing for me as a comic because it was a really good, strong routine and there wasn't anything in there outside of pointing out my ignorance and risk, stupidity and so. Yeah, they are. There are lines and there are people that cross them. But again, I just look at malice. I look at the intent. If I can sense again, I to me I anything goes.

Shea Houdmann

As with anything, it's a learning process and adapting both to your audience to the culture, and you've learned that just as we've learned that and in various aspects of our ministry. Even how we answer people's questions has had to adjust and adapt over the years. But so let's talk about Are We There Yet? What led you to write this book and specifically on why that title? Why Are We There Yet?

Jeff Allen

Well, it's interesting. I I I'm not a writer. My wife and I, she's been pushing me for 10 years to write it. Because after speaking at churches, people would come over and say, have you written that down? For years, you know, have you written it? No, I haven't. I'm not a writer. I'm not a writer. I don't write. And Tammy, my wife. You know, if she wanted to start an argument in our home, all she had to do was say, what did you write in your book today? Nothing. Not a word. And then we would argue. And I said, I said, as cliché as it sounds, within the Christian circles, I told her in God's time this book will be written. If it's meant to be written, it will be written.

Jeff Allen

And about a year ago, a little over a year ago, I was doing something at NRB and national religious broadcasters, I was just performing, doing a 10 minute comedy set to break up the evening. And somebody from Salem Media was backstage and oddly, they had never heard of me. I I mean, I've been doing comedy since 1978 and I've been in the Christian world for 20 plus years. And anyway, they did a little research on me and on the on YouTube there was my testimony. So somebody from Salem Media reached out to my management and said has he got that written down? We'd be interested in doing a book. So I send them some of my writings. And this was great, in my house, this was this was great. I sent them a couple chapters that I had written and they said you're obviously gonna need some help. And I said, could you call my wife and tell her that I'm not a I'm not a writer. So what we did was we hired a guy. I hired a guy to help me edit the stories, otherwise it would have been a 400 page tome of of all this minutiae that nobody's really interested. I said if you could just go through my audio, my talks, and all this stuff and pick out stuff that you think is relevant to this story. I would love to put it down and on paper. I think it's written from a 35 year perch. I'm 35 years past this. I wanted to write something for my children and grandchildren to let them know what their parents and grandparents went through. So that in their life if they hit hard times this could be a a reference to go well, Mimi and Papa got through this. We can get through this as a couple.

Jeff Allen

Are We There Yet came from a friend of mine brought that up. He said he took a trip with his kids. He was, he's in his late 30s and he said I just get tired of hearing that, are we there yet? And we all know that when you have kids and it just really hit me, I think it's a God thing. It just hit me that that's what

my journey in recovery was like. As a child, you get in the back seat of your parents car and they go on a trip. You have no idea where you're going, you really don't. You have no idea what the destinations, you know what the time frame and you know nothing. You absolutely nothing except through the questions you ask. And are we there? Are we there? You know, you stop and a rest. Are we there? Are we there? Every time you stop is this it? Are we come tired when we gonna get there? And that was recovery for me. I likened it to your parents leaving you at a rest area and just taking off and leaving you the keys to the car and you're a nine year old. You don't even know how to drive. You don't know where you know where you're going or whatever. So you got to rely on everybody around you who's been there. Wherever there is and then you realize at some point I did 20 years in, there is no there. This side of heaven. So it was the impatience of recovery, impatience of the restoration, and then when the redemption came through my acceptance of Christ eight years later, it was like the veil had been lifted. This is what I've been looking for. It's just that peace. I just immediately became comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my entire life, I was comfortable. What I chased through alcohol and drugs and porn, was everything I got the day after I accepted Christ.

Jeff Allen

I woke up that day. I'll never forget it. I sat on the end of my bed and go what is? It was such a weird feeling. You've heard the term lightness of being. That's what it was like. It was like something that had been lifted and I couldn't put my finger on it. You know, holy cow. I feel good, you know? And you don't realize how bad you felt till you feel good. You know, it's like, and I I go oh, yeah, last night I gave my life to Jesus. Is that what this is? I you know I again I I'm 40 years old. I had I was completely naive. So that's the arc of the book is the you know I always tell audience if you get through the first 6 chapters without, you know, killing yourself it's actually an uplifting tail. We didn't hold back anything. I wanted the reader to understand what we were like as a couple. Tammy read, I wanted her to be involved in the last draft because I said if you're not comfortable with this, because people don't wanna talk to her when they get done reading it, especially women. And I said if you, if you don't agree with the, you know the parts just let me know. Whatever makes you feel uncomfortable. Whatever you know, because you know, I unloaded everything. And she read the first two chapters and put it down and said I can't read it anymore. We were such horrible people. And I said that, but that's the beauty of the story. Jesus didn't leave us there. You know the world breaks people all the time and they leave them in a trash heap. The streets are full of people that the world crushed. But when God breaks a man or a woman, he doesn't leave you there. He invites you into a new relationship and a new life. And so you can look back on on who you were. And go holy cow. We were horrible people. And we're not those people anymore.

Jeff Allen

So that's kind of the arc of the book, you know. And it's, that decision that I made 25 years ago to tell Jesus I'm yours. Whatever that looks like. I had no clue. I had none. I was in the back seat of the car. And throughout that journey for the last 25 years, I I've I've had moments where I just go. Am I there yet? I'm tired. I'd smash a plate, break a cabinet, scream at my family, and I'd sit in my room and just go, I want to be done. I don't want to do this anymore. When am I done? Jesus's answer to me is just you go out, you repent. You say your apologies. You say you're sorry. I love you too. Do better. Going forward. You know. And there is no there.

Shea Houdmann

Not till we're there, right?

Jeff Allen

Absolutely.

Shea Houdmann

So in your book, a lot of the, your testimony is sort of like your Solomon in Ecclesiastes sort of experience, where we see tried to find meaning and purpose and joy in everything else and found it to be empty. So talk a little bit about that and how that ultimately plays such a huge role in bringing you to Christ.

Jeff Allen

Well, it's interesting, I I in hindsight again you go back in hindsight. You know, I again that morning that I sat on the end of my bed. I I I was reflecting and I had this vision of of this view in in my mind's eye. You know, you can kind of see the of this valley, this plateau. I'm sitting on something and and there were these markers in my life and that little voice says I was there. I was there. I was there, I was. I was always there. So I can look back in hindsight and say God's hand from the time I was in my 20s, he was he was coaxing me along in in ways. I'm sorry I lost track of the question.

Shea Houdmann

So Solmon and Ecclesiastes, finding everything.

Jeff Allen

Oh, Solomon, that's all that was. That was my thought was about money. My goal when I started comedy, I was I quit a job I was making \$300.00 a week. So I said, boy, if I can make \$300.00 a week telling jokes, that would be amazing. Took me a while but I got there right. Then I got the five. Then I got the \$750. I got to \$1000. I got the \$1200. Got to \$1500. And I think. It was around \$1800 dollars, \$2000 for the week. I realized I'll never make enough money. I mean, I just knew it. I was buying more cocaine and more booze, you know? So I I knew money wasn't the thing. When I, when I got miserable in life. I knew money wouldn't bring me happiness. I knew that, so I was looking for other things. And for me, you know, I talk about this in the book. It it's almost sounds funny, but it's it was golf. You know, I I thought if I could change careers and become a professional golfer, what I'm you'd be laughing if you if you saw me play golf, but it's.

Shea Houdmann

Like same with me man.

Jeff Allen

But that's it. But again, when you when you're, you know when you're broken, you're thinking, OK, I I can, you know, maybe maybe, you know, I can I can do this. But yeah, I alcohol, drugs, money. I just knew. So when I was primed, I mean new age. I read those books. I read self help books. I read Buddhism and and and it was all of this. You know, I always say it's like I had a spiritual thirst that that I didn't know I had. It was a spiritual thirst. I was looking for something to quench my spirit. So I would read these things and for brief moments, they I would go, this is it. I got it. I would come home and tell

my wife like I I think I got, you know. Great Jeff. We're we're we're losing the house. I know. I know. We're losing the house, but I I'm I'm telling you, I think I I'm I found something that's gonna mend me, you know. And and things are going to get better. And it lasted for a week, a day or 10. Whatever. It didn't matter. So I was primed to hear meaningless, meaningless all in life was meaningless. Nothing of this earth will ever give you lasting joy.

Jeff Allen

And I think it's in the first chapter of Ecclesiastes it says the eyes never get enough of seeing. The ears never get enough of hearing. And when I heard that I, you know, again I left because I I was, I was in my living room listening on a boom box to a tape. And I had thousands of tapes and CD's. And I had the video library. I mean, hundreds of VHS's videos. And I that's true. I never get enough. I mean, I'm always buying stuff for my ears and my and my hearing in my eyes. And it's interesting. I I I said years ago I said if if I was the devil and I wanted to eliminate God, I'd create ambient light which would just wipe out the stars. I mean you can't see a star in a city anymore. You look up, it's nothing. So that's gone and then I'd get rid of the still quiet voice inside of all of us. I'd put some ear pods in. And then just make music and a loud music. And then that's still quiet voice. Because I tell I used to tell my children you got staring at the ceiling in the quiet is a prayer. Just laying still for 10 or 15 minutes and staring at the stucco is an activity, wouldn't make a career out of it. You'd starve. Those moments are when God can speak to you in those quiet moments. If it's loud and noisy, it's hard to discern, it's hard to discern. So I was primed to hear meaningless, meaningless all in, like and I went yes, that is true. And I never thought the Bible was anything, but I felt that was a deep truth to me. A deep truth that I had come to on my own. I had come to that conclusion. I was a nihilist, you know, I was hard to be around. I really was. I was just negative and sour and. But when nothing matters, I always tell people when you're full of acrimony wait till you get to empathy. Then nobody wants to be around you.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah. So again, Are We There Yet? It's excellent read, as you said, it's difficult at times. I mean, you had a very painful journey with you and your wife, but the way God brought you out of it and the transform transformational change that's happened since you came to faith in Christ, it's amazing. So strongly encourage our listeners to acquire this book, to read it, and learn from it because it's it's if nothing else, it's powerful example of how God can transform a life, as he did with you, Jeff. So before we sign off and I didn't prepare you for this one, but I'm pretty sure you can handle it. I'm for you. What is the funniest story in the Bible?

Jeff Allen

In the Bible?

Shea Houdmann

In the Bible.

Jeff Allen

Well, you won't believe this, but when I when I first started studying the Bible, Ecclesiastes, and then Job. Job that book cracked me up. And I'm sorry, but that's just the way my brain wired. And when you think of all this stuff. He had no idea what was going on behind the scenes, so he's got a, you know, part

of his crew comes in and goes, you know, the cows just got fire pumped. And one thing after another, this calamity and then when his wife looked at him, you know, and said, are you still worshipping God? Curse Him and die. I mean that just made me laugh. I thought, you know. Yeah, that's a human response to someone who does not have any idea what's going on behind the scenes. And it is. I mean, you realize. Yeah, that's a lot of garbage. You know, it's just one thing after another man. It's it's, it's almost it, it becomes laughable to me so anyway. That's that's my favorite. I yeah, I revisit Job all the time because his friends were completely off base with their, with their advice and assessment of the situation. I mean it's it's just a really good book for today's you know, we got a lot of noise out there giving people advice and it's it's just get quiet and pray and God will reveal. And. And you might actually make it through whatever you're going through.

Shea Houdmann

That whole miserable comforters statement that came out of Joe's mouth.

Jeff Allen

Yeah, exactly.

Shea Houdmann

And they talk about the understatement of the of the year, that. So Jeff, thank you for this conversation. And again, I'd strongly encourage our listeners to pick up a copy of Are We There Yet because it is the again, a difficult book, especially in the beginning, but the seeing the amazing transformation that God has done in your life and in your family's life, it's it's powerful and it's powerful reminder of what God can do and that no one is beyond God's ability to reach.

Jeff Allen

Absolutely 100%! 100%. And your marriages are solvable. They're solvable, they really are.

Shea Houdmann

Well, Jeff, keep doing what you're doing. Keep making people laugh and bringing joy because like I told you before the interview, I was just watching some of your videos before this and you literally brought me to tears. The the good type of tears, and my wife was looking at me like, why are you laughing that hard, but for whatever that particular point of humor was just what I needed this morning. So keep doing what you're doing.

Jeff Allen

That's great.

Shea Houdmann

Allow God to use you.

Jeff Allen

I am until until I go to the other side and actually see the veil lifted, you know.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. That's been the Got Questions podcast with Christian comedian Jeff Allen, author of *Are We There Yet*. Got Questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.