

A Time To Laugh

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Several years ago a couple in our congregation went through the process of adopting a child. The adoption agency even allowed the child to live with this family almost a year. Then a legal snafu developed, and the child was taken away. While both hopeful parents were devastated, the wife was especially grief stricken. Another woman in the congregation came up and put her arm around her, saying, "Mary, if there is anything I can do, please let me know." The grieving woman turned to her and said, "Will me a million dollars." After an initial startled look from the sympathetic friend, both women burst into laughter, relieving the oppressive tension.

One of the most valuable and productive traits in godly character is a healthy sense of humor, yet the term "humor" is not found anywhere in the Bible. No concordance will help us in this study. There are many instances, however, where humor is directly used, including God Almighty's rather wry sense of humor.

"You-More"

We could easily consider humor a facet of joy, one of the fruits of God's Holy Spirit. Humor, especially the self-effacing variety, helps us to puncture an inflated ego, allowing ourselves to develop the humility to esteem others above ourselves. Humor expert Joel Goodman has performed an instructive word play on the word "humor," breaking it down into "you-more." He explains, "For me, humor is something that makes 'you' feel 'more' self-confident, more connected to other people, more relaxed, more part of a group." We could add to Goldman's mnemonic that humor helps us develop the humility to esteem "you more" than me (Philippians 2:3).

Jesus Christ's brother James says, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (James 1:2). We can endure pain, stress, or any kind of grim situation a whole lot better with a healthy sense of humor. A dear friend, Coen Rood, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, has developed a remarkable sense of humor through his ordeal.

In October 1970, about a week before the Feast of Tabernacles, I was hit by a drunk driver as I stood next to my stalled car. The next conscious thing I realized, I was lying on the pavement in what seemed to be—at least to me—gallons of blood. My lower leg and foot I could move back and forth like a piece of sliced bratwurst.

Needless to say, I was panic stricken. By the time the ambulance arrived at the hospital, I had convinced myself that I would not make it to the next morning. When we arrived at the emergency ward, a crusty old Jewish doctor, Max Levine started to examine me. I grabbed his hands and pleaded, "Doctor, am I going to die?" He replied, "Sure. So am I. So what?"

This unexpected reply brought a sudden sense of calm. I could not help laughing at his "inappropriate" response. Momentarily, my anxieties returned, and I asked, "Are you going to amputate my leg?" "Not tonight," he said in a rather bored, but soothing tone.

Though I did not realize it at the time, Dr. Levine was dispensing some of the most reliable and sophisticated therapeutic techniques known to man. Proverbs 17:22 teaches us that, "A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones." Strangely, the medical and scientific community has taken centuries to validate this valuable Biblical principle.

The Best Medicine

Nearly 20 years ago, Dr. Laurence Peter (the originator of the Peter Principle) wrote in his book, *The Laughter Prescription*:

For a long time medical doctors have known that happy patients generally respond more favorably than do cheerless and complaining ones. The evidence is overwhelming that laughter, confidence, and hope have significant therapeutic value, while sadness, fear, and despondency tend to produce negative outcomes.

Dr. William F. Fry of the Stanford Medical School says, "If it were not for laughs, we might be much sicker than we are. Without our realizing it, day to day humor may be making a significant contribution to our physical well-being." Fry merely substantiates one of Solomon's godly inspired proverbs, "All the days of the afflicted are evil [because of anxious thoughts and foreboding], but he who is of a merry heart has a continual feast [regardless of circumstances]" (Proverbs 15:15).

Laurence Peter gives four reasons why humor or laughter produces such therapeutic outcomes:

1. It distracts attention.
2. It reduces tension.
3. It changes expectations.
4. It increases the production of endorphins, the body's own natural pain killers.

In *The Philistine*, Elbert Hubbard wrote, "Pain is deeper than all thought; laughter is higher than all pain." Laughter, indeed, relieves aches and pains brought about by muscle tension. This release of tension proves especially therapeutic for high blood pressure and cardiovascular problems. Laughter, by increasing levels of adrenaline, actually promotes greater mental alertness. Dr. Fry suggests that the ability to laugh at oneself is a key to the restoration of physical health.

Spiritual Benefits

Psychologist Harry A. Olson suggests that "sick people, especially ones who are depressed, take themselves much too seriously." Physician David Bresler concurs with Olson's findings, adding, "I find it draining to be around serious-minded people all the time."

What about us? Do we take ourselves too seriously and forget to see the humorous side of our predicament? During my first year of teaching, I found a huge discrepancy between the ideal and the real, especially when I discovered that half of my English literature class had plagiarized their term papers from encyclopedias. At that time, I did not find too much wrong with the request of James and John back in Luke 9:54.

During semester break, I wandered down the main street of my home town. My former eighth-grade English teacher, Miss Bornemann, stopped me on the sidewalk. She had evidently noticed my long

face from the other side of the street. After a brief discussion, during which time I poured out a litany of woes, she said sharply, "David, if you want to stay in teaching, you're going to have to develop a sense of humor." I credit her brief admonition for not only saving my career, but my spiritual well-being as well.

It appears that throughout the scriptures God repeatedly admonished people not to take themselves or their predicaments too seriously. Moses, Elijah, Job, Gideon, Jonah and many others all had to be metaphorically bounced on God's knee and their heads gently patted until they settled down.

In Job 23:2-3, Job complains, "Even today is my complaint bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come to His seat!" Fifteen long chapters later, the Lord calms Job down, putting things back into perspective, gently deflating his sense of self-importance, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4).

To see humor in any situation involving others, we must have patience and understanding of their dilemma. Through all of God's patience with Job, He saw humor in Job's ordeal as parents sometimes see humor in the predicaments their children get themselves into because of inexperience or poor choices. With genuine humility we can enjoy and learn from our own mistakes and those of others without seeming to ridicule or degrade them.

Another impetuous man who seems to have taken himself and his predicament too seriously is Jonah. God Almighty starts to put the whole series of events into perspective in Jonah 4:7-11:

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant, for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?"

How often have we identified with the anger and despair of Jonah, Job, and Elijah? Most of us have probably found ourselves in a similar situation. We take ourselves too seriously, denoting a lack of humility. We also become angry at other people, who are probably innocent of any real offense against us. Consider Matthew 5:22:

But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Like Jonah, many of us have allowed our righteous anger to transform into a root of bitterness, causing us to become defiled (Hebrews 12:15). The perennial deterrents to spiritual growth are anger, bitterness, fear, anxiety, and pride. Remarkably, none of these character traits can coexist with a godly sense of humor.

In God's Image

The great God of the universe, who has created all things to reflect His character (Romans 1:20)—including the monkey, the jackass, and the duckbilled platypus—encourages us to add humor to our repertoire of behaviors.

» Ecclesiastes 3:4 teaches us that there is "a time to laugh," as well as a time not to laugh.

» Psalm 2:4 shows that, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold [the nations] in derision," when they, like the Keystone Cops, try to fight against Him.

» To add levity to the consequences of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief, He inspired Abraham to name their first born "Isaac" (Hebrew *Itzsak*), an echoic or onomatopoeic representation of Sarah's laughter (Genesis 21:3; see 18:11-15).

Mark Twain once suggested that the real source of humor is tragedy, adding that "to see the incongruities and to tolerate them is to laugh." In Viktor Frankl's death camp account, *Man's Search For Meaning*, he describes the following poignant episode:

Most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays.

To cope with our personal trials and tragedies, which will not diminish as time marches toward Christ's return, we need to learn to laugh at our circumstances, but more importantly at ourselves. This behavior will aid us in becoming properly humble before God Almighty. And only when we live humbly before God will He exalt us in His Kingdom.