



## The Best Medicine

Does God ever laugh? Would Jesus ever tell a joke? What type of humour should Christians enjoy?

Many people think God is very cold, sober and distant. They think Christians should be serious and staid. After all, life is a serious matter. And our Christian calling is a serious and sobering responsibility.

What does God say about humour and laughter?

Proverbs 17:22 “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.”

Commenting on this verse, a doctor said, “If you can’t take a joke, you’ll have to take medicine.”

Another doctor observed that cheerful people resist disease better than glum folk. He added “The surly bird catches the germ.”

Laughter is indeed a great blessing from God. It’s only given to man, who is in the image of God – animals don’t laugh at jokes or humour. When a boy lets out a howl of laughter at something that tickles his sense of humour, the dog will look at his master with a blank expression. He won’t get the joke!

And laughter is great medicine, as *Reader’s Digest* famously says. Laughter is really good for us. A little bit of humour can make our lives more enjoyable, help us really feel good, give us a boost, and it’s often contagious and gives other people a lift too. Your laugh can make another person laugh! Often we end up laughing at the way other people laugh, and everyone has a great time and feels better.

The Mayo clinic website lists the health benefits of laughter. It soothes tension, relieves stress, increases endorphins, improves the immune system, produces natural pain killers and lessens depression. It stimulates the heart, lungs and muscles. You could assume people who laugh, live longer: if not, at least they have more fun while they are living!

If we can share a good joke with someone and give them a laugh, that’s a way of giving to them, and feeling better ourselves too (unless they don’t get the joke!)

Laughter can help us get through the trials of life. That can even include the loss of a home. People in Idaho remember well the collapse of the great Teton Dam in 1976, and the devastating flood that ensued. They still talk about the families who, after they were safe on high ground, were able to see the humour in their tragic plight. As several homes floated by on the flood waters, one family member joked: “There goes the Jorgensons’ place. They’re just trying to keep up with the Joneses” – whose house had drifted past moments earlier.



But of course, we need to be tactful about this – there are times when laughter isn't appreciated – we'll have a look at those later in the sermon.

While we're here in Proverbs, notice Proverbs 15:15 "All the days of the oppressed are wretched, but the cheerful heart has a continual feast."

God is happy – He enjoys laughing. 1 Timothy 1:11 describes God as "the blessed God." The Greek word for blessed, "makarios," can also be translated "happy." Joy is one of the fruits of His spirit. He wants us to rejoice. For instance Philippians 4:4 says "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice."

The Psalms tell us to "Shout with joy," "Be glad," "Sing," "Bless the Lord," "Rejoice," "Be joyful," "Clap your hands," "Make a joyful noise to God."

Psalm 4:7 "You have put gladness in my heart."

Psalm 16:11 "In Your presence is fullness of joy."

There are 3 ways we can tell God enjoys humour and laughing.

1. He created man to enjoy humour, and we are made in His image.
2. There's lots of humour in nature. God has given the creation a touch of the comical, which shows something of His personality and character. At zoos and aquariums you often hear laughter as people watch the cheeky and comical antics of the monkeys, penguins, parrots and cockatoos, etc. We often laugh at our pets – the dog wagging his tail, or the kitten chasing a ball of string. And then there are babies – they make us smile and giggle – and indeed smiling and giggling is one of the first things they begin doing in life, after just a few weeks.
3. There are lots of examples of humour in the Bible.

Let's have a look at some. Humour is a great way of getting across lessons and learning, so that's one of the major ways God uses it. It can be found from one end of the Bible to the other.

In the Book of Genesis, Abram means "father of many," yet he couldn't have children. Perhaps people who met him and asked his name would ask "How many sons do you have?" His name was then changed to Abraham, which means "father of a multitude" – and he still didn't have kids for ages!

When he eventually was told by God about the birth of a son, Abraham laughed, and that's how Isaac got his name.

Genesis 17:17, 19 "Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" <sup>19</sup> Then God said, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac."<sup>[d]</sup>

The footnote [d] in the NIV says: "*Isaac means he laughs.*"

Notice Genesis 26:8. "...Abimelek... looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah." In the Hebrew, "Isaac was Isaicing with Rebekah" – "Laughter was laughing with Rebekah."

It takes a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek to understand the puns, or plays on words, of the Bible, but there are many of them.

An interesting example is Judges 15:16 Then Samson said, “With a donkey’s jawbone I have made donkeys of them, with a donkey’s jawbone I have killed a thousand men.” The NIV footnote says “Or *made a heap or two*; the Hebrew for *donkey* (or *ass*) sounds like the Hebrew for *heap*.”

The KJV says: <sup>16</sup>“And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.”

Samson celebrated his victory with a play on words. William Wordsworth referred to this, putting it “With the jawbone of an ass, a mass, two masses...” Or you could use the word “I ass-ass-inated them.”

Isaiah 5:7B includes a delicate play on words. “He looked for judgment (mishpat), but behold oppression (mishpah); for righteousness (tsidaqah) but behold a cry (tsaaqah).” An English equivalent has been suggested, “He looked for equity, and behold iniquity, for a sceptre, and lo, a spectre.”

Because they were written in a totally different age, we don’t get the jokes like they did then. To us, a more modern joke of the same type is funnier, e.g. “How do we know Paul was a baker?” Because he went to Philippi (fill a pie!). But it’s the same thing really.

Another similar play on words – Any lawyer should be able to handle 3 cases a week – a murder case, a divorce case, and a case of scotch!

The Book of Proverbs uses some humorous illustrations to get some points across, e.g.

Proverbs 11:22 “Jewel of gold in a pig’s snout.”

Proverbs 26:14 “Lazy like a door turning on hinges.”

Proverbs 26:17 “Like one who grabs a stray dog by the ears”.

There are examples in the historical books also, e.g. Saul was searching for David, and he was in the very cave Saul came to rest in, so David cut off part of his coat, and the joke was on Saul!

Absalom’s crowning glory was his hair, but it got caught in a tree and was his downfall. Of course there’s tragedy in it too, but also an element of humour.

As in the Book of Esther, when Haman, full of pride, is asked “What shall be done to the man the King delights to honour?” He thinks it’s him, but is shocked to find it is his arch-enemy Mordecai, and he will hang in the very gallows he built for Mordecai. There’s a type of humour called *irony*, which comes into play here and a number of other places. (E.g. 2 Kings 6:18-23.)

Here’s an example of sarcasm, another type of humour:

1 Kings 18:27 (TLB) “About noontime, Elijah began mocking them. “You’ll have to shout louder than that,” he scoffed, “to catch the attention of your god! Perhaps he is talking to

someone, or is out sitting on the toilet, or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!"

The incident of Balaam's donkey, trying to get past an angel Balaam couldn't see, and then talking to Balaam when he hit it, is quite a humorous one also, especially in the Living Bible.

Numbers 22:22-30 (TLB) <sup>22</sup> "But God was angry about Balaam's eager attitude, so He sent an Angel to stand in the road to kill him. As Balaam and two servants were riding along, Balaam's donkey suddenly saw the Angel of the Lord standing in the road with a drawn sword. She bolted off the road into a field, but Balaam beat her back onto the road.<sup>24</sup> Now the Angel of the Lord stood at a place where the road went between two vineyard walls.<sup>25</sup> When the donkey saw him standing there, she squirmed past by pressing against the wall, crushing Balaam's foot in the process. So he beat her again.<sup>26</sup> Then the Angel of the Lord moved farther down the road and stood in a place so narrow that the donkey couldn't get by at all.<sup>27</sup> So she lay down in the road! In a great fit of temper Balaam beat her again with his staff.<sup>28</sup> Then the Lord caused the donkey to speak! "What have I done that deserves your beating me these three times?" she asked.<sup>29</sup> "Because you have made me look like a fool!" Balaam shouted. "I wish I had a sword with me, for I would kill you."<sup>30</sup> "Have I ever done anything like this before in my entire life?" the donkey asked. "No," he admitted."

An example of God's humor is the instance in which the Israelites were using the Ark of the Covenant like a good-luck charm in taking it to battle, and the Philistines ended up capturing it and placing it in their temple before their idol of Dagon. They came into the temple the next day and found Dagon flat on his face before the ark. They set him back up. The next morning, there he was again, but this time he had his hands and head cut off as a symbol of his powerlessness before the God of the ark ([1 Samuel 5:1-5](#)). God's putting Dagon in a position of submission to His ark is a comical picture.

There are similar examples, such as the confounding of the languages by God at the tower of Babel. Children enjoy that story, as well as that of David defeating a huge giant with a tiny pebble, Gideon's men defeating the Midianites using trumpets, pitchers and lamps, Jonah trying to run away from God, but being caught by a fish, etc.

In a way God has such power that He can play with mankind and laugh at us. When we try to run away from Him, or disobey Him, He can laugh at it.

Notice Psalm 2:4 "The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them."

And Psalm 115:2-8 <sup>2</sup> "Why do the nations say, Where is their God?" <sup>3</sup> Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him. <sup>4</sup> But their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them."

### **Some New Testament examples:**

Matt 4:18-19 (KJV) <sup>18</sup> And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. <sup>19</sup> And He said unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Jesus used a play on words – "fishers" of men.

Matt 5:15 “Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.”

It would be a bit funny to go to all the trouble of lighting a candle and then hide it under a bowl! Maybe Jesus Christ laughed as He gave this illustration – maybe not, but there is an element of humour in this and many other pictures He painted, e.g. the next chapter...

Matt 6:26 “Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”

Imagine a bird sowing, reaping or gathering into barns.

Also back in Verses 2 and 3 <sup>2</sup>“So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. <sup>3</sup>But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”

And Matt 7:3 “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

Imagine criticising someone with a speck in his eye, when you have a plank in yours!

Matt 7:9 “Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?”

Matt 7:15 “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”

Wolves in sheep’s clothes. The unexpected deviation from the norm is what makes humour – that’s why we laugh at a person who slips on a banana skin.

When Jesus called His disciples James and John, two hot-headed outspoken men, “Sons of Thunder,” that showed a sense of humour. (Mark 3:17 “James son of Zebedee and his brother John (to them He gave the name Boanerges, which means “sons of thunder”).)

After Christ’s resurrection, He probably enjoyed kidding the disciples along when He walked with them and they asked about Jesus, without letting them know it indeed was Jesus that they were talking to!

Paul used plays on words, irony and sarcasm quite a lot.

1 Cor 4:8-10 <sup>8</sup>“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! <sup>9</sup>For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. <sup>10</sup>We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured!”

The people were puffing themselves up in their great vanity to be better than Paul. He uses sarcasm in handling this situation.

2 Thess. 3:11 “We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies.”

People who were busybodies instead of busy bodies! Instead of working at jobs, they worked hard on other people’s affairs. The idea is they were working but not working at the same time. The other versions have fun translating it.

“At nothing working, yet too busily working!” – Rhm

“...just loaf around and won’t do any work, except the work of a busybody” – CEV

“They are doing nothing except being busy in the lives of others.” – ERV

“Neglecting their own business to mind other people’s” – Knox

1 Tim 5:13 “Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to.”

This identifies the same sort of people – with idle hands but busy tongues!

Laughter and humour is great medicine; it’s really good for us and it’s a way to give to others. Laughter itself is contagious – your laugh can make another person laugh – often we end up laughing at the way other people laugh, and everyone has a great time and feels better. If we can share a good joke with someone and give them a laugh, that’s a way of giving to them, and feeling better ourselves too (unless they don’t get the joke!)

Victor Borge said: “Laughter is the shortest distance between 2 people.”

The Koran says “He deserves Paradise who makes his companions laugh.”

If we can see the funny side of things we won’t find unpleasant incidents affect us so much – if we can laugh them off we will end up getting on better with other people.

No wonder it says in Ecclesiastes 3:4 “There is a time to laugh.” But also there’s a time to refrain from laughter. When we are telling jokes and indulging in humour we do need to be careful not to carry it too far – humour needs to be limited to proper times and proper topics.

Notice Eph 4:29 “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

And also Eph 5:3-4 <sup>3</sup>“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. <sup>4</sup>Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

We shouldn’t be involved with dirty, vulgar jokes. And be very careful with ethnic jokes that put down other races and people. I think there’s a time where you can say “there was an Englishman, an Irishman and an Australian” etc, as long as it’s not putting down and offending someone.

We need to be careful not to laugh at other peoples’ misfortunes or mock or ridicule them.

Gal 5:15 “If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” This expresses that type of behaviour very graphically.

But notice Gal 5:22 – the fruits of the Holy Spirit are first, and most important, LOVE, and notice what is second – JOY!

1 Thessalonians 5:16 must be about the shortest verse in the Bible. It says “REJOICE EVERMORE!”

God isn't a cold, sober, poker-faced old fuddy duddy as some people imagine. He is vibrant, alive, happy, joyful, friendly and positive. And He wants us to have a sense of humour, enjoy fun and laughter (of the right type), smile, laugh, enjoy life, and rejoice always.

Let's turn to Psalms 16:11 in closing.

“You make known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand.”

In almost every aspect of life, it's very hard to think of any medicine better than the stimulating, revitalising, joyful medicine of LAUGHTER!