

Introduction

- Read Acts 1:9–11 (NIV)
⁹ After he (Jesus) said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.
¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” ¹
- As we get close to the conclusion our series on the Book of Acts, I want you to remember back to April when Pastor Kim kicked off the series on Acts, she said the Book of Acts had in it, among other things, humor.
- In this morning’s passage I see a number of things, and one of them is humor.
- To appreciate the humor in the passage that Dan just read, picture the scene in your mind. This group of men, standing around looking up at the sky. Not just a glance but it sounds as if they are continuing to gaze upward. Then these angels come by, look at them, and ask what are they doing as if they were doing something ridiculous.
- I get a smile out of this scene.

Fully Appreciate Scripture

- In Scripture we see love, sorrow, anger, and compassion. That is just describing the emotions that God shows, not those that people show. To that list we need to add humor.
- It is easy to see only what we want to see when we read the Bible.
 - For those who desire order, God is only a stern disciplinarian
 - For those who desire love, God is only love.
 - For those who desire grace, God is only compassion.
- All of these are both true and false. They are true in that God has each of these characteristics but God is not limited to one characteristic, He has many. For example: God is love but that is not all that God is.
- To fully appreciate scripture, we must understand all of what is in it. Not only what we want.

Counter arguments

- So when I say humor, I don’t mean the type of humor that tears people down or hurts people. Just like there can be unhealthy forms of love, there can be unhealthy forms of humor.
- Unlike human humor, the humor in the Bible is not cruel or malicious. It is not in God’s nature to hurt us.

- Humor in the bible is not just there to entertain, there are always serious aspects to the examples that I'm going to give this morning.
- To be fair, some people don't see any humor in the Bible. Rogness writes: "Philosopher Alfred North Whitehead didn't see any: 'The total absence of humour in the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literatures.'

(However author) Dorothy L. Sayers thought (thinks) the opposite. ... (she writes)

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The Scriptures are rich with humor—people acting in foolish ways, the irony of people acting differently than one would expect, the sudden twists in a story to illustrate a meaning. The Bible is about human life—all of it—how could it not contain humor?"²

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Thesis

- I acknowledge that for some, life is filled with pain and challenges. The season of life that you find yourself in is not at all humorous. I don't want to minimize what you are experiencing. God is with you in this time and He will bring you through it. However, there are times in which we experience life through humor, even when we are in the depths of despair.
- This morning, I want to make a case for:
 - the presence of humor throughout the Bible,
 - how it shows a side of God that we can miss and
 - how humor helps us look for God.

Humor and Human life

- We can see the humor from the very beginning of scripture. In Genesis 3:12–13, we hear of the fall of humanity.

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Genesis 3:12–13 – Why did you eat the forbidden fruit?

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When God asks why Adam ate the forbidden fruit, Adam points to Eve and said that she made him do it, Eve points to the serpent and says the serpent made her do it. The serpent is at the end of the line and can't blame anyone else.

- That is an example of human life that Sayers speaks about. When cornered we want to deflect the blame and put it on someone else.
- We see that this does not fool God. There are consequences for everyone because of this sin.

Missing what is in front of us

- We have seen humorous passages already in our series on Acts.
- You may remember a couple of months back in May we covered the Acts 12:6–9. The passage described the time Peter was in prison and the Angel of the LORD shows up to get him out.
 - Let me paraphrase the passage. Peter is asleep in prison. An angel appears and a light shone in the cell. The Angel struck Peter on the side to wake him up. The angel has to tell Peter exactly what to do—get up, put on your clothes and sandals, wrap your cloak around you and follow me. Peter was still half asleep, he thought that it was a dream.

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision.

Luke, the author of Acts, could have said the Angel woke Peter up. No, it says in v 7 “He struck Peter on the side and woke him up.” Struck Peter on the side. I think that he could have kicked him in the side, as if he was impatient with him. Maybe Peter was a sound sleeper and the angel tried to wake him gently before.

- If we read this passage and we are too serious, it is easy to skip over these details.
- The passage continues. Peter, after being set free from prison knocks at the door at Mary’s house: Acts 12:12–16

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Acts 12:6–16 - Peter’s escape from prison and knocking at Mary’s door.

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¹² When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying (for Peter).³

¹³ Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door. ¹⁴ When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!”⁴

It is a great story but she doesn’t open the door to let Peter in but leaves him out in the street. That is funny.

- Poor Rhoda. What everyone is praying for happens but she doesn’t fully realize it.
 - We do that at times too. We ask God for something and expect to have our prayers answered in a particular way.
 - As we will see later, God doesn’t always answer our prayers in the way that we think He should. The answer to Rhoda’s prayer was on the other side of door but that wasn’t quite where she was looking. She walked away from it.
- Many of us have done this, I know that I have—not seen answered prayer that was right in front of me.

Benefits of humor

- Humor is the quality of being amusing or comic. We get a smile from it. We may laugh out loud. Humor can be contagious.

Humor and laughter trigger healthy physical changes in the body. One web site says:
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- Laughter relaxes the whole body.
- Laughter boosts the immune system.
- Laughter triggers the release of endorphins
- Laughter protects the heart.⁵

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- I would add that laughter protects the soul. Laughter restores our perspective on things. It causes us to stop and laugh. It gives us a bit of a fresh start to look at things anew.
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- Laughter protects the heart.⁶
- Laughter protects the soul.
- Laughter restores perspective.

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Human condition

- One way that humor gives us a fresh start is that it often exposes the human condition. I like this cartoon from Gary Larson's Farside comic strip:
- http://api.ning.com/files/mVad9iZi0UPEzVfvuSAMvKKSjPIq6-p1epqR9BNu3dRqMujGjBC7StGh0S3W*VXyFH0QzQKu1EFYYgC6XTFArz9RqViOOLvE/farsidegodaddsjerks.png
- Somehow this resonates with me. We have all run into people who we thought were acting like a jerk. At the time we would not think of them as making life more "interesting". However, I realize that I may be one of those jerks. It gives me pleasure. Perhaps that is why we have the details of Peter's rescue in Acts. So that we can see ourselves in Peter's or Rhoda's place.
- Often things are humorous because it points out things that are perhaps too true. The truth is so starkly revealed, it almost hurts.

- <http://i.imgur.com/wwnZ6Oh.jpg>
- It also demonstrates how when we look around, we can be blind.
- We need to do the same thing when we look for God, we must sometimes take a step back and take in the whole picture.
- In today's scripture, (Acts 1:9–11) at Jesus' ascension, the disciples are looking in the wrong place for Jesus.

Jesus told them to go wait in Jerusalem but they are standing there like idiots, looking up at the sky. It's funny because someone else needs to point it out to them. Don't you wish that the disciples would have just taken a step back, thought about all that Jesus had told them and understood?

- This is funny because it is also true of us. We are often guilty of looking for Jesus in the wrong places.
- It is funny because part of us knows that we too should be looking for Jesus in new places, as well as where we have met Him before. Yet we don't.
- We don't take that step back and see all that Jesus has done for us and how we can trust Him. We should learn that we should not box Him into our expectations.
- Some humor is also very culturally dependent because it includes a reference to cultural norms or customs. After all, if you have to explain it, it is not funny.

Balaam

- Luckily, some humor bridges the gap between cultures just fine such as the story of Balaam's donkey: Numbers 22:24–31. Let me paraphrase the passage.
 - Balaam (בְּלַעַם) is traveling to a neighboring kingdom and God doesn't want him to go. But Balaam is trying to please both God and the neighboring King.
 - Balaam gets on his donkey and sets out on his trip.
 - God sends an angel who stands in the road to stop him. The donkey sees the angel with his sword drawn and veers off the road into a field. Balaam doesn't see this and beats the donkey back on to the road.
 - The angel next stands in the path bordered by the walls of a vineyard. The donkey presses close to one wall and crushes Balaam's foot against the wall. He beats the donkey again.
 - Lastly the angel stands in a narrow place where there is no place to pass. The donkey sees this and just lays down under Balaam. Balaam beats it again.
 - "Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"
 - Balaam says that he is being made a fool of.
 - The LORD then opens Balaam's eyes and he sees the angel.
 - Numbers 22:24–31
 - ²¹Balaam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with the Moabite officials. ²²But God was very angry when he went, and the angel

of the LORD stood in the road to oppose him. Balaam was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. ²³ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with a drawn sword in his hand, it turned off the road into a field. Balaam beat it to get it back on the road.

²⁴ Then the angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path through the vineyards, with walls on both sides. ²⁵ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it pressed close to the wall, crushing Balaam's foot against it. So he beat the donkey again.

²⁶ Then the angel of the LORD moved on ahead and stood in a narrow place where there was no room to turn, either to the right or to the left. ²⁷ When the donkey saw the angel of the LORD, it lay down under Balaam, and he was angry and beat it with his staff. ²⁸ Then the LORD opened the donkey's mouth, and it said to Balaam, "What have I done to you to make you beat me these three times?"

²⁹ Balaam answered the donkey, "You have made a fool of me! If only I had a sword in my hand, I would kill you right now."

³⁰ The donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your own donkey, which you have always ridden, to this day? Have I been in the habit of doing this to you?"

"No," he said.

³¹ Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. ⁷

Adults take this perhaps too seriously. I think that a kid would get the humor of a talking donkey that sees what an adult doesn't see.

- It doesn't mean that we should just laugh at it and move on. In this case it says something very true about Balaam. He doesn't see God in front of him because he is trying to please everyone – both God and human.
- Does that also convict of us of trying to please both God and people?

Lessons from Humor

- It is funny because it is true. That is what humor does—it points out the truth. It cuts through all the extraneous stuff and exposes the truth. In this case, the true is that we don't see what is in front of our face.
- Scholar Rogness writes:
"All throughout the Scriptures God acts in unexpected ways. We expect one thing, but God turns our expectations upside down and surprises us. We can't help but smile at this flagrant irony."⁸

- Balaam needs a donkey to expose the truth.

Need the whole truth

- Later in Acts, there is another humorous story dealing with truth.
- In Acts 19:13–16, we see some Jews who have part of the truth—the power of Jesus’ name—but they do not have the whole truth—the need of believing in Jesus. It goes:
 - ¹³ Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, “In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out.”
 - ¹⁴ Seven sons of Sceva ((see’vuh) - Σκευᾶς), a Jewish chief priest, were doing this.
 - ¹⁵ One day the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?” ¹⁶ Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. ⁹

This is physical humor. I can picture these folks, running out of the house, their clothes in tatters, screaming their lungs out. I laugh at this but I pray that I have the entire truth.

Humor in answers to prayer

- One thing that we learn by pausing and taking a step back, is that when we pray, we need to remember our prayer and be on the lookout for unconventional answers to our prayer.
 - Seems like God has a sense of humor sometimes when He answers prayer. At least it may seem humorous to us. Many of us have experienced this.
 - I’ve heard the expression “you have to be careful of what you prayer for.” The lesson from that is not “don’t pray” but that God may not answer prayer in the form that you expect.
 - For example, you can pray that you can forgive someone who you don’t like, who has hurt you and seems like an enemy to you. God can answer that prayer and turns the two of you into friends.
 - Or you could pray to God to draw you closer to Him, and He gives you something to struggle with which in turn helps you grow closer to God.

Sara

- An example of an unexpected answer to prayer, at least timing wise is the story of Sara and Abraham having a son in Genesis 18:10–15.
 - Let me paraphrase this passage. The LORD appears to Abraham. He tells Abraham that next year Sarah will have a son. Sarah, who is listening at the entrance to the tent hears this and laugh to herself thinking we are both old, how can this be. But the LORD hears her. V. 13-15 says:
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¹⁰ Then one of them said, “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son.”

Now Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind him.

¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were already very old, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?”

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really have a child, now that I am old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too hard for the LORD? I will return to you at the appointed time next year, and Sarah will have a son.”

¹⁵ Sarah was afraid, so she lied and said, “I did not laugh.”

But he said, “Yes, you did laugh.” ¹⁰

Busted by God.

- Sarah didn't believe and laughed. She had stopped looking for an answer to God's promise. But the joke was on her—in a good way. In Genesis 21:6, after God has given her a son:

⁶ Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” ¹¹

Saul

- I wonder if there are other humorous episodes that are just hinted at in the Bible.
- I can just picture Saul, the evening before he left for Antioch, praying to God to enable him to defeat God's enemies.
 - What happens, Saul is the enemy and he gets changed (Acts 9:1–5). This is pure speculation, it is not in Scripture, but it would fit with God's sense of humor, wouldn't it.

Conclusion

- In conclusion, if we try to overanalyze, we can miss understanding all of scripture. I think that we also miss a side of God that is in the scriptures and in our experience of answered prayer.
- We need to look for God in unusual and unexpected places. We should not be like the disciples in Acts 1 standing there; looking up to the sky for where they last saw Jesus.
 - God is everywhere around us. Not just where He “should be” or where we want Him to be. He is everywhere!
 - We need to look all around us for Jesus, we must look where we saw Him last but we must also keep our eyes open to new and unexpected places to find God.
- When we see something that isn't what we expected, perhaps we just:
 - need to chuckle to our self,
 - accept it from God, and

- say “OK God—that is a good one on me.
 - Thanks for the laugh.
 - Also thanks for the gift.”
 - It’s part of having a personal relationship with all of God.
 - Appreciating humor in scripture both changes us and restores our perspective so that we can better appreciate God’s word to us.
 - Scholar R. Alan Culpepper writes
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“Humor in the Bible celebrates the goodness of God, the world God created, and the life God gives.”¹²
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 - Relax. Pray. Read the Bible. Have a chuckle at times. Enjoy the goodness of God.
- Join me in prayer

- Dear Jesus,
- Sometimes we only look for You where we expect you to be. We box You in with our expectations.
 - Forgives us Lord.
- You cannot be boxed in. Open our eyes and expand our horizons to see everything that you have placed in front of us.
- And if we walk gazing at the sky, and we trip over something that you have laid at our feet, let us laugh with you and enjoy your gift.
- We want to be bathed in the warmth of Your love, the comfort of your grace, and the smile of your humor.
- In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Endnotes

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