

A Time to LAUGH

*Do you picture God as a cold, frowning Judge
always on the verge of anger? You shouldn't —
God is the very Creator of humor.*

God created the smile. So He knows how to smile. He created laughter. So He knows how to laugh. In fact, the Bible says our Maker is the “happy” God (I Tim. 1:11 — the Greek word translated “blessed” is *makarios*, which is just as correctly translated “happy”). In God’s presence is “fulness of joy” (Ps. 16:11), and laughter is one way joy can be expressed.

Who can visit a zoo or an aquarium and not be impressed that God has a sense of humor? Penguins sliding down the ice, bears begging for a tasty morsel, ostriches strolling on ungainly legs, monkeys swinging by their tails, angler fish dangling their bait — from insects to elephants, from fish to birds, God’s sense of humor is reflected in His creatures. The mere sight of a dog wagging its tail or a kitten playing with a string says, Smile!

And then there are babies. Any loving, attentive parent knows how amusing — yes, funny — a baby can be. The facial expressions, the sounds and the movements of an infant all demonstrate the warmth of a generous, all-wise Creator.

Adults, too, do many laughable things, sometimes on purpose and sometimes in spite of themselves. For many years various television programs and periodicals have capitalized on depicting the funny incidents in which people get involved.

Biblical humor

But the creation we see around us is not the only indication that God has a sense of humor. The Bible, inspired and preserved by God, contains many passages that, if they are not expressly humorous, at least have a note of levity to them, if only in

their portrayal of human foibles.

The book of Daniel relates how King Belshazzar made a great feast for a thousand of his lords. They were drinking wine and having a real riot of a time.

Then Belshazzar thought it would be clever to have everyone drink wine in the cups and vessels that had been plundered from God’s Temple. So the vessels were defiled, to the sound of uproarious laughter. But the mirth of this drunken revel was soon cut short by another clever joke — this one on Belshazzar himself.

Suddenly a hand appeared and began to write on the wall. “Then the king’s color changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together” (Dan. 5:6, Revised Standard Version). Note the humorous picture God paints of Belshazzar’s reaction to His intervention in this party.

How about the time pompous King Saul was humiliated by David (though David afterward realized he had done wrongly and repented)? Saul and his army were hunting for David in rugged country when the king stopped and entered a dark cave, not knowing that David was hiding in that very cave.

While Saul was most vulnerable David crept up and cut off a piece of the king’s garment (I Sam. 24:1-5). The joke was on Saul!

Consider what happened to ridiculous Balaam when he was riding on an ass. Balaam wanted the ass to go in a certain direction, but the ass refused to move. The animal saw an angel standing in its path, preventing passage — an angel Balaam couldn’t see. Balaam was frantically beating the poor creature, trying to get it to obey, when, to his astonishment, God caused the ass to speak and ask why

it was being beaten (Num. 22:22-28). Imagine the look that crossed Balaam’s face and how he must have felt at that moment.

Sometimes God laughs in derision. As He looks down from heaven and sees vain, pompous mortals strutting around on the world scene like so many silly peacocks, God laughs — in pity. He beholds the feverish attempts of men to unite together in opposition to His holy ways, only to have their efforts crumble. He hears atheists proclaiming with lofty arrogance that He does not exist. Such foolishness must make God lean back on His throne, tilt His head up and let go a peal of laughter that causes the very pillars of His heavenly temple to quake (Ps. 2:4).

Notice in what colorful terms God pronounced judgment upon sinful Jerusalem: “Behold, I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle. . . . I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down” (II Kings 21:12-13).

God, of course, does not laugh at man’s ludicrous machinations out of cruelty. He merely looks ahead to the beautiful, glorious, perfect Kingdom He knows He is going to soon set up and sees how foolish it is for man to worry about this comparatively unimportant world. God is happy about the joy and contentment He knows will replace the sadness and strife in this world when He reestablishes His government on earth (Rev. 21:4).

Jonah’s adventure

It is difficult not to see humor in Jonah’s story. God told this prophet to go to the mighty city of Nineveh and tell the people there to repent. Jonah didn’t want the job. But he

knew God wouldn't give up. So he thought he would board a ship and go somewhere God couldn't find him. Poor Jonah. Did he think he could hide from the Almighty?

Jonah's ship set sail, and God sent a terrifying storm that tossed and heaved the little vessel until it was about to break in pieces. When the ship's crew found that Jonah was responsible for the storm buffeting them, they tossed him overboard.

But the story doesn't end here. A great fish came along and swallowed Jonah. As he was being sloshed down the gullet of this denizen of the deep and the immense jaws were closing behind him, Jonah must have thought his days were over. Instead, he found himself in pitch blackness — wet, tangled in seaweed, but alive. For the next three days Jonah did some fervent praying and repenting.

About this time the fish began to develop a monumental case of indigestion. And so a beleaguered but submissive Jonah was vomited up on dry land. Once again God told him to go warn the people of Nineveh that divine retribution was imminent. This time Jonah obeyed.

And, amazingly, the people of Nineveh were an exception to the rule: They believed and repented. But notice the humorous length the Ninevites went to in order to show their reformation: "And he [the king of Nineveh] caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God" (Jonah 3:7-8).

Imagine it: Every soul in the kingdom, from the king to the last lamb in the smallest herd, fasted, put on sackcloth and was supposed to cry out loud to God. That must have been quite a sight!

But that was the problem. The nation repented. And God in His mercy decided not to destroy Nineveh as Jonah had prophesied would happen. Jonah was hopping mad — mad at the Ninevites for repenting and mad at God for sparing them. Jonah was afraid his word would be worthless since what he had said did not come to pass. And besides, had he

gone through the episode of the ship and fish all for nothing?

So he put together a shelter not far from the city, sat under it and had himself a good pout. Poor Jonah. The story closes with God using a gourd and a worm to show Jonah how foolish his sulky attitude was.

The Proverbs

The book of Proverbs contains different forms of humor, such as irony, sarcasm and analogy.

For example, a beautiful woman who is indiscreet is compared to a jewel of gold in a swine's snout (Prov. 11:22).

Great fun is made of a slothful person. He is too lazy to lift his hand to his mouth (Prov. 26:15). He just reposes in bed, turning from side to side like a door on hinges (verse 14), inventing absurd excuses for not going to work (verse 13).

It was probably Solomon's experiences with 1,000 women that helped him come to some conclusions not entirely lacking in humor (Prov. 21:19, 27:15).

Joy part of God's nature

Jesus used humor when it was appropriate. He called two of His disciples the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Perhaps they were unusually bombastic individuals. He had a name for King Herod, too. He referred to him as "that fox" (Luke 13:32).

Though Jesus was stressing seriously important principles, some see a hint of wit in His statements about not letting the left hand know what the right hand is doing (Matt. 6:3), the camel going through the eye of a needle (Matt. 19:24), the blind leading the blind and both falling into a ditch (Luke 6:39) or making some who were fishing into fishers of men (Matt. 4:19).

Jesus must have enjoyed impetuous Peter who, boldly trying to walk on the water, was overtaken with fright. He yelled for help as he began to sink below the waves (Matt. 14:28-31).

Then there was the time after Christ was crucified when Peter decided to forget all about his calling and go fishing. He was sitting in a boat when Jesus appeared to him. Peter was so flabbergasted that he

jumped overboard (John 21:3-7). He had to make sure he was really seeing who he thought he was.

The apostle Paul sarcastically referred to false teachers in II Corinthians 11:5 as "chiefest" (meaning "hot-shot" or "super-duper").

Jeremiah 1:11-12 contains another good example of a play on words used by God. Though it is not evident in the English language, in Hebrew the word for "almond tree" is similar to the word for "hasten." Jeremiah said, "I see a rod of an almond tree [*shaqued*]." Then God replied, "Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten [*shoqued*] my word to perform it."

As you study the Bible, do so with the realization that God is not a stern, implacable, austere Being who never has any fun. Far from it. He is warm and loving. One of the fruits of His Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22). Joy is part of God's nature.

Our responsibility

God has given mankind the blessing of laughter. He says "a merry heart doeth good like a medicine" and "he that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast" (Prov. 17:22, 15:15). Over and over again the Bible talks about how our relationship with God, once we have repented of our sins, should be joyful.

Of course, laughter and humor can be misused. There are times when levity is not appropriate (Rom. 12:15). Just as there is a time to laugh, there is also a time to weep (Eccl. 3:4).

To laugh and joke about things that are foolish, off color, indecent or evil is wrong. Notice Paul's warning:

"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. . . there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity . . . these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving" (Eph. 4:29, 5:3-4, New International Version).

Animals can't appreciate humor. Human beings can, for they have been given that gift by God. Let us enjoy it properly. □