
LAUGHING THROUGH TEARS: THE REDEMPITIVE ROLE OF HUMOR IN A FALLEN WORLD

Erik Thoennes*

A PERSONAL QUEST

Let me begin with a couple of confessions: My interest in humor is deeply personal. I write as one who cherishes humor and as one who has struggled throughout my life to know when my humor is godly and when it is not. I have seen clearly in my life that the ability to laugh is one of God's greatest gifts for coping with the difficulty of life in a fallen world. For as long as I can remember, a sense of humor grounded in the knowledge that God loves me has often provided needed perspective and peace. Being able to laugh, especially in the face of hard times, and having the ability to make others laugh, have been among the greatest blessings of God in my life. So, my interest in humor is far more than just academic. And I hope yours is too.

A FEAR

I should also tell you that the intellectual pursuit of attempting to understand laughter scares me. In some ways laughter defies explanation and definition. Humor's resistance to exegesis seems to be part of its magic. I fear that in studying humor this wonderful source of solace, freedom, and perspective may lose its power. As soon as you have to start explaining a joke you pronounce it dead. I suspect that E. B. White was right when he said, "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to an but the pure scientific mind."¹

* Erik Thoennes is associate professor of biblical studies and theology at Talbot School of Theology/Biola University. He holds a PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Dr. Thoennes also serves as pastor of Grace Evangelical Free Church in La Mirada, California.

¹ E. B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor," preface to *A Subtreasury of American Humor* (New York: Coward, 1941); quotation available online at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/984.html>.

WE MUST APPRECIATE AND UNDERSTAND HUMOR

But humor demands that we think hard about it for at least five reasons:

- 1) *Humor is a unique, God-given, universal, human experience.*
- 2) *Humor is a vital part of most meaningful, healthy human relationships.* I certainly agree with W. H. Auden when he says, "Among those whom I like or admire, I can find no common denominator, but among those whom I love, I can: all of them make me laugh."²
- 3) *Humor goes bad quickly.* There are few things that become unedifying as quickly as humor. Some of God's best gifts, like sex, can be very hard for us to steward well and easily become pleasures that draw us away from God. We are tempted then to dismiss them as merely worldly pleasures.
- 4) *Christian maturity means developing a godly sense of humor.* A. W. Tozer had "Rules for Self-Discovery"³ he used to assess his spiritual condition:
 - i. What we want most (goals).
 - ii. What we think about most (thoughts).
 - iii. How we use our money (money).
 - iv. What we do with our leisure time (play).
 - v. The company we enjoy (friends).
 - vi. Whom and what we admire (heroes).
 - vii. What we laugh at (humor).

Number seven surprised me the first time I read it, but it makes sense when we realize that sanctified humor is a key indicator of Christian maturity. The mature believer should laugh and cry at all the appropriate times.

- 5) *Ministers should help people laugh well.* A Christian who takes his role as a minister to others seriously must be able to lead people in godly laughter. As a pastor of a dear flock of growing saints and a teacher of college students who generally have a deep hunger to know God, I am convinced that helping my charges survive in a very broken world requires a robust sense of humor. It is vital to understand and communicate the wonder and joy of knowing the infinite God who has wed himself to a frail, funny-looking bride, and is busy making

² W. H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962); quotation available online at <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/1980.html>.

³ A. W. Tozer, "Day 6," in *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1995).

her and this deformed world beautiful. A minister of the gospel must be able to cry and laugh, at times simultaneously, and help others to do so as well.

THE DIFFICULTY OF DEFINING HUMOR

The basic definition of humor is: "The quality that makes something laughable or amusing; funniness; that which is intended to induce laughter or amusement; the ability to perceive, enjoy, or express what is amusing, comical, incongruous, or absurd."⁴ Humor is a universal human experience. One of the first things a baby does to distinguish herself from the animal kingdom is smile and laugh. Nothing melts the heart of a new parent more quickly than that most human connection with a baby that a smile and laughter provide. Laughing is basic to being human and to being in human relationships. As Jackson Lee Ice says,

Man is the only animal that weeps and laughs and knows that he weeps and laughs, and wonders why. He is the only creature that weeps over the fact that he weeps, and laughs over the fact that he laughs. He is the most humor seeking, humor making and humor giving species that has walked the earth, ever ready to provoke or be provoked with laughter; even in the midst of fear and pain he is capable of incongruously ameliorating his misery by a smile, pun, or joke. He is the jester in the courts of creation.⁵

While humor is universally experienced, it can be hard to define in any objective sense because it is so relatively recognized. Anyone who has lived in a different culture than the one in which they were raised will tell you that the hardest and last thing to get is the humor of that new culture. Everyone laughs, but often at very different things, for different reasons, even in the same culture. This was shown in a recent study on humor by the British Association for the Advancement of Science.⁶ People around the world submitted their favorite jokes and rated the submissions of others. After forty thousand jokes from countries and two million evaluations, here is the world's funniest joke:

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other man pulls out his phone and calls emergency services. He gasps to the

⁴ "Laughter," in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000).

⁵ Jackson Lee Ice, "Notes Toward a Theology of Play," *Religion in Life: A Christian Quarterly of Opinion and Discussion* XLII, no. 3 (Autumn 1973): 392.

⁶ Find out more about this study online at <http://www.richardwiseman.com/research/laughlab.html>.

operator: "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator, in a calm, soothing voice replies: "Take it easy. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the hunter says, "OK, now what?"

The second funniest joke in the world was this one submitted from the UK:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they retire for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes up and nudges his faithful friend.

"Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Holmes," replies Watson.

"And what do you deduce from that?"

Watson ponders for a minute. "Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. Theologically, I can see that God is all-powerful, and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes is silent for a moment. "Watson, you idiot!" he says. "Someone has stolen our tent!"

There were major national differences in what jokes got laughs. Jokes involving wordplay were big in the UK, the Republic of Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. The U.S. and Canada laughed hardest when people were made to look stupid, as in this U.S. winner:

Texan: "Where are you from?"

Harvard Grad: "I come from a place where we do not end our sentences with prepositions."

Texan: "OK—where are you from, jackass?"

Europeans like to make fun of serious subjects like illness, death, and marriage:

A patient says, "Doctor, last night I made a Freudian slip. I was having dinner with my mother-in-law and wanted to say: 'Could you please pass the butter?' But instead I said: 'You silly cow, you have completely ruined my life.'"

This one was a winner in Scotland:

I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my grandfather—not screaming in terror like the passengers in his car.

And this was the overall winner in the UK:

A woman gets on a bus with her baby. The bus driver says: "That's the ugliest baby that I've ever seen. Ugh!" The woman goes to the rear of the bus and sits down, fuming. She says to a man next to her: "The

driver just insulted me!" The man says: "You go right up there and tell him off—go ahead, I'll hold your monkey for you."

Whether or not you found any of these jokes funny, or perhaps even offensive, could depend on any number of factors, including the possibility that you have no sense of humor. However, the main conclusion of this massive study of humor was how humor is universally experienced, yet relatively appreciated. In spite of the difficulty this presents, we must seek to define, understand, and appreciate this most human experience.

RECOGNITION OF INCONGRUITY

"Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck by the difference between what things are and what they ought to be."

—William Hazlitt

Darwin said that humor helps us climb the food chain. Freud thought it was the expression of repressed sexual feelings (what a surprise!). But generally those who have studied the topic explain humor as a recognition of incongruity—a sudden invasion of a deeper reality that is always lurking around the normal routine of acting like we really aren't the bumbling fools we all know deep down that we really are. A clown's big feet, a pie in the face, or even a satirical glimpse into our racist views can serve as a comforting reminder that we are not in this struggle alone, and that there may be hope for getting through it after all. Laughing is a collective sigh of relief, that, if only for the moment, gives us all permission to be frail as we go through this divinely orchestrated comedy together.

Suffering as Incongruity

Suffering exposes the great incongruity of life and so it should come as no surprise that there is a fundamental connection between suffering and humor. Suffering, if experienced with at least a shred of hope, can sharpen a sense of humor, and, conversely, a sense of humor can be a vital means of coping with suffering. Those who have suffered a lot often develop a keen sense of the incongruities around us all. As Jürgen Moltmann says in his book on a theology of play, "Games, jokes, caricatures, parodies, imitations, and intentional misunderstandings may be regarded as a means of emancipation for those who are burdened and heavy-laden."⁷ With this in mind, it is no coincidence that African Americans and Jews rule the comedy industry in America.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 13.

Jewish Humor

Peter Berger explains the highly developed Jewish sense of humor by showing its basis in a highly developed theodicy.⁸ He says that Jewish humor is the most developed and sophisticated primarily for three reasons:

First, because of the Diaspora, Jews have almost always had an “in but not of” perspective. They adapt to whatever culture they are part of but never completely fit in to the point where they fail to notice the foibles of humanity. Most of us tend to get used to how odd we really are, which can limit our perception of the humor around us. But the “in but not of” perspective is *the* perspective of the comedian. Christians have not been forced to develop this view of themselves by historical conditions as much as the Jews, but they should have it just the same if they take to heart Jesus’ perspective of themselves when he says, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world” (John 17:15–16).

It has been said that comedians are the most intelligent people in a society because they look at what the rest of us are but see it from a different perspective, the perspective that sees how foolish we all are. High intelligence, developed through needing to understand a written, law-based religion, is the second reason Berger gives for the sophistication of Jewish humor.

Finally, Berger sees the depth of Jewish humor as a result of the high view of God in the Old Testament, coupled with the ability to question the state of the world because of the covenant. Abraham’s bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is a good example of this. Because God is holy, good, and sovereign, there is an expectation that the world should be running better than it seems to be. Because of the covenant, there is a freedom to actually point out the problems in the world and bring our frustrations to God.

HUMOR IN THE BIBLE

Humor is not explicitly dealt with in the Bible. God is only recorded as laughing once, in Psalm 2, as he derisively mocks the proud. We have no record of Jesus laughing. But to say there is no humor in the Bible is like saying that there are no seasons in southern California; you just need to pay attention. Although the Bible is a mostly serious book and the humor is usually a subtext, if you read it with your imagination working, it should make you laugh quite a bit. My good friend Dave Talley, an

⁸ Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1997), 87–95.

Old Testament scholar, had read Numbers 11 many times. But until he read it with his eight-year-old son, Andrew, last year he had never seen the humor in God telling the Israelites that in response to their whining about food, he would give them such a steady diet of meat that it would come out their noses. Andrew's uncontrollable laughter at this image opened Dave's eyes to the humor in this picture, humor present even when mingled with God's indignation.

Leland Ryken takes the surest path and defines the humor in the Bible according to literary categories.⁹ He points out examples of situation comedy (Haman's demise), humor based on character types (Jacob and Laban, Peter), satire (Jael's "hospitality" to Sisera), sarcasm (Elijah to the prophets of Baal), irony (God challenging Job to play with Leviathan), and exaggeration (Jesus' reference to the hypocrite's beam in his eye).

These literary categories help put some objective sense to biblical humor. But to understand humor and laughter in the Bible, we also need to appreciate related concepts like play, Sabbath, feasts and festivals, childlikeness, dancing, leaping, and music. All of these are impossible to do well without serious laughter.

Passages That Expose Human Frailty and Sin

I think the most obvious, intentionally funny passages of the Bible are the ones that point out standard human frailty and foolishness. Here are a few passages that I find humorous.

The Human Proclivity to Avoid Responsibility

- *Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:12-13):* "The woman made me do it." "The devil made me do it."
- *Aaron to Moses (Exod. 32:24):* "So I said to them, 'Let any who have gold, take it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, *and out came this calf.*"¹⁰

Human Dullness

- *Jacob and his sons (Gen. 42:1-3):* "When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, '*Why do you look at one another?*' And he said, 'Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that

⁹ Leland Ryken, "Humor," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic edition, ed. Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, Colin Duriez, Douglas Penney, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: 2000, c1998), 407.

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001). Italicized words indicate emphasis added.

we may live and not die.’ So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt.”

- *The angel to the apostles after the Ascension (Acts 1:10–11): “And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”*
- *Jesus repeatedly asking the religious leaders who prided themselves on their knowledge of the Scriptures: “Have you not read?”¹¹*
- *Peter at the door after his release from prison (perhaps the funniest scene in the Bible; Acts 12:14–16): “Recognizing Peter's voice, in her joy she did not open the gate but ran in and reported that Peter was standing at the gate. They said to her [Rhoda], ‘You are out of your mind.’ But she kept insisting that it was so, and they kept saying, ‘It is his angel!’ But Peter continued knocking, and when they opened, they saw him and were amazed.”*
- *Seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13–16): “Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus, whom Paul proclaims.’ Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, ‘Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?’ And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.”*

The Lemming Syndrome

- *The crowd at the riot at Ephesus (Acts 19:32): “Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.”*

Sarcasm

- *The Israelites complaining to Moses (Exod. 14:10–12): “When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, ‘Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, “Leave us alone that we may serve the*

¹¹ See Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3.

Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.'" "

- *Achish, complaining, perhaps indirectly, about the difficult people under his charge (1 Sam. 21:12–15):* "And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. Then Achish said to his servants, 'Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?'" "

Humor and Hope (Eschatological Perspective)

Laughter is most prominent in the story of the birth of Isaac, whose name means "laughter." Isaac's story prepares us for the staggering grace of the gospel that looks absurd to eyes not adjusted to the light of God's power and goodness. Everyone seems to be laughing in this story.

- *Abraham laughs at God's absurd grace (Gen. 17:15–19):* Abraham laughs at God and is still considered his friend. As Douglas Jones points out: "[T]his actually tells us more about God than Abraham. Jehovah is the friend of the best kind of foolish things, not angst, scowls, academic prose, or rice cakes."¹²
- *Sarah laughs at God's absurd grace (Gen. 18:9–15):* One could easily forgive this old woman for laughing at the suggestion that a ninety-year-old woman could ever bear a child. She hadn't heard about the Virgin Birth yet.
- *Lot's sons-in-law laugh at God's judgment (Gen. 19:12–15):* This is perhaps a stinging critique of the sons-in-law—they had been so jaded by the wicked culture of Sodom that it was hard to imagine that fire from heaven could actually be warranted. Or perhaps it is a critique of sons-in-law in general—especially by a Jewish father who seldom would think a man good enough for his daughter. It could also be a statement about Lot's lack of integrity or his apathy as he lived in Sodom. They did not take him seriously so his words fell on deaf ears.
- *The whole world laughs with Sarah at God's absurd and amazingly real grace (Gen. 21:5–7):* Everyone was laughing at God, whether

¹² Douglas Jones, "Ironies of Laughter," *Credenda Agenda* 16, no. 1 (April 2005): 4.

it was for his amazing grace or his fierce judgment; he defies our plans, expectations, pretensions, self-assurance, disappointments, and hopelessness. Whether in righteous judgment, putting self-deifying mortals in their proper place (Ps. 2) or in crushing our despair at the foot of the cross, God always gets the last laugh. Gospel-grounded hope is the foundation of Christian laughter. This laughter springs from belief in God's ability to bring radical reversals of fortune within this badly fallen world.

The Folly of the Cross

God's redeeming power that evokes laughter from believers is seen most powerfully in the "folly" of the redemptive work of Christ (1 Cor. 1–2): the glorious Creator becoming a baby and growing up to be a carpenter; the Creator of beauty becoming one who had nothing in his appearance to attract us to him; the source of all joy becoming the Man of Sorrows; this cursed and crucified Holy One, sustaining the universe as he makes his triumphal entry on a donkey, and who will one day return as a wrathful lamb. His life conjures images of Don Quixote chasing windmills and dreaming the impossible dream, except that Jesus does not die at the end—well, he does, but he is resurrected again—and all our hopes and dreams come true in him.

The gospel is incomprehensible without a sense of humor. A sense of humor enables us to transcend life in our broken world, and, if only for a moment, to see the incongruity of the human predicament as the absurd but fixable problem it is. But sin is not absurd if there is no righteousness, and brokenness makes no sense if we are not intended to be whole. Death is only the great enemy because we were intended to live forever. The sense that God brings to our lives defies the fallen state to which we have become accustomed. We should never get used to the incongruity. In Romans 8:20–22 Paul tells us that

the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.

Humor in the Christian worldview recognizes the relentless difficulty of life in our cursed world, but also that it is being redeemed by the One who created and cursed it. So, we have hope, and laughter, in the midst of our brokenness. As Jürgen Moltmann said, "He suffered that we may laugh again. . . . In the cross of Christ God is taking man dead-seriously so that he may open up for him the happy freedom of Easter."¹³ The hope of redemption makes humor the healthy panacea it should be for

¹³ Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 32–33.

us. Without hope, humor becomes cynical, bitter, and unedifying. When grounded in the hope of the gospel, humor can become one of life's greatest and most encouraging pleasures.

The Laughter of Heaven: When Laughter Takes Over

Christian laughter is the response of those who know God as their Father and know that he has overcome the world, and that he loves to share abundantly with his children the spoils of this victory. "Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them'" (Ps. 126:2). "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" (Luke 6:21).

There are a few times in life when our souls and bodies are overtaken by our hearts. In sexual expression, sobbing, or uncontrollable laughter, we get a slight glimpse of what it will be like to be done with this sin-sick world, and to be in the presence of God—lost in wonder love and praise.¹⁴ As Douglas Jones helpfully (and humorously) states, "[S]cripture commends self-control but not forever, not for the eschatologically mature. Self-control is more like training wheels for the eschatologically challenged. The whole direction of the New Covenant moves away from external controls toward the law-made-instincts on the heart (Jer. 31:33–34), a move away from training wheels to instinctive wheelies."¹⁵

The paradoxical nature of Jesus' kingdom teaching demands an imaginative sense of wonder and humor. The loss of wonder is often mistaken for Christian maturity. As Conrad Hyers rightly observed, "[T]rue maturity involves a resurrection of childlikeness."¹⁶ As Job's understanding of God took off and his faith matured, so did his wonder: "Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know" (Job 42:3). Christian humor should see the suffering in this twisted world for what it is, but always through the eyes of cross-centered hope.

Heaven lacks all incongruity, so laughter as we usually know it will probably no longer be needed. God has no frailty at which to laugh, but he must be able to laugh at our folly along with us, fundamentally because of the greatest "folly" of all—the cross. The cross is no laughing matter, but the freedom it brings incites the overwhelming laughter of slaves set free. God is the God of hope, who turns our mourning into

¹⁴ Jones, "Ironies of Laughter," 4.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Conrad Hyers, *And God Created Laughter* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987),

laughter because he is the God of the cross—the ultimate answer to the problem of pain. Following Jesus turns pain into glory, confusion into wonder, sin into redemption, and Good Friday into Easter Sunday.

CONCLUSIONS

So, what is a Christian understanding of humor? How should a Christian laugh? Well, fundamentally, we should laugh the way we do everything else—for the glory of God and the good of others. God tells us that every part of human experience has the potential to be glorifying or dishonoring to him:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:17)

So, if I can eat a peach to the glory of God, I must be able to tell or laugh at a joke to the glory of God as well. When we laugh from hearts full of hope, as forgiven children of the King of Kings, that hopeful laugh glorifies God and gives a glimpse of things to come when he will wipe away every tear once and for all.

The Bible never explicitly addresses humor *per se*, and it is safe to say that it is a mostly serious book that seeks to pull the reader away from his sinful, God-ignoring sloth and distraction and to an earnest pursuit of his Creator and holy living. Indeed, it can be a dangerous thing to encourage humor in a culture that so often and so easily trivializes God and life itself. But to fail to see the place of humor in the Christian life will turn piety into sanctimony, reverence into rigidity, and sanctification into stuffiness. We must take God as seriously as we can, but never ourselves. While seeking to deepen our fear of God, the Bible also seeks to embolden us to approach him as his free, forgiven, secure children. We are to approach our holy God with healthy fear and hearts broken by our broken world. But God's people are also called to rejoice and sing, play and laugh because we know that the owner of all things is working out his perfect plan that ends with a wedding banquet and perfect resolution and rest. It is this sure hope in God's sovereign power and loving-kindness that enables us to laugh with reckless abandon, even before the Great Wedding Banquet begins.