



Rhoda the Maid (and other funny stories in the Bible)

Acts 12:5, 11-17

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A young and nervous bride planning her wedding was increasingly terrified about her upcoming marriage. To calm her nerves, she decided to have a Bible verse which had always brought her comfort engraved on her wedding cake. The verse was from 1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love; for perfect love casts out fear". She called the caterer, and all arrangements were made.

About a week before the wedding, she received a call from the catering company. "Is this really the verse you want on your cake?" they asked. Yes, she confirmed, it was the one she wanted, and after a few more questions they said they would decorate the cake as requested.

The wedding day came, and everything was beautiful...until the reception, when the bride walked in to find the cake inscribed with not 1 John 4:18, but John 4:18: "For you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband."

This story is not from the Bible, but sometimes people will come up to me and ask, "Are there any funny stories or humor in the Bible? It always seems so serious." And I give a resounding, "Yes! I should do a sermon on that someday." The day has come.

The Bible does advocate humor and laughter. Proverbs 17:22 says "A cheerful heart is good medicine." Sometimes, it is hard to see the humor in the Bible because the story has become so familiar to us that we miss the humor. Plus, the stories are set in a different culture; it was funny to them, but not so much to us.

For example, Jesus used humorous exaggeration to get a point across. Kind of like when we say, "I haven't seen you in a million years!" We are not literal; it really hasn't been a million years. It is just a way for us to say: I haven't seen you in a really long time.

Imagine the twinkle in Jesus' eye when he talked about looking at the speck in the eye of another but ignoring the log in your own eye. When we read it today, we are so serious, and admit that we need to own up to our own faults.

But Jesus' audience is picturing the log coming out of their eye, and turning their head and banging into things because of this log sticking out. Point taken, but you are so funny, Jesus! LOL! (For those of you not text savvy, LOL means "Laugh Out Loud.")

Or, Jesus says it's hard for a rich person to get into heaven; it is as difficult as threading a camel through the eye of a needle. Jesus' audience envisions trying to get the camel through that needle. Point taken, but they laugh at the silliness of it all. You are hilarious, Jesus! ROFL! (ROFL: Roll On the Floor Laughing)

Jesus was playful. So much so that Jesus had a reputation for eating and drinking. In the Gospel of Luke 7 Jesus says, "The Son of Man [Jesus' favorite term for himself] has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" Jesus was known as a lush!

Jesus even had fun with names: James and John were called "Sons of Thunder," because they were hotheads. He called the religious leaders of his day white-washed tombs. I can imagine the audience getting a chuckle out of that one.

Keep in mind that "Jesus never compared the Kingdom of God to a religious experience in a temple, but with a party or celebration!" (Andrew Jones). Jesus said, "I came that you may have and enjoy life, and have it in abundance"" (John 10:10). Maybe this is one reason why people wanted to hang out with Jesus. He

was fun and funny. Oh, I wish there was a verse in scripture that said, “And Jesus laughed.” We would have so much more fun with Jesus if that verse existed.

I’ve been talking the about the sayings of Jesus that were funny, but let’s turn to some stories in scripture that contain humor. We are not going to delve deeply into these stories...I just want you to know that the Bible can be funny. But I will give you a sentence or two of what we can learn from each of these stories so we can have some depth here.

Our first story is our scripture passage this morning. Turn to Acts 12.

As we delve into these stories, keep in mind that I am not a comedian. I didn’t get those genes, my brother did. I am not expecting you to LOL, and I won’t be hurt if you don’t, but I am showing you these stories so when you read scripture, you will always be on the look out for the humor.

Before we read, let us pray: God, I believe you are a God of humor because you created laughter. As we read your Word this morning, open and fill our hearts to the joy and humor of your people. In Jesus’ name, amen.

The context: Peter has been arrested and put into jail.

Read Acts 12:5, 11-17 (I am skipping verses 6-10; they tell how Peter escapes from prison).

There are several things that make this story funny. Peter knocks at the door at the same time the disciples are fervently praying for the release of Peter from prison. Rhoda the maid goes to the door and recognizes Peter. She is so excited that she forgets to invite Peter in. She leaves him at the door. I can imagine she opens the door a bit, sees Peter, slams it in his face and runs to tell the disciples.

And what is the response of the disciples? They don’t believe her...at all. “You are out of your mind,” they say to her. Peter is continually knocking at the door as she tried to convince them that their prayers had just been answered. This is funny. And blessed Rhoda the maid is remembered forever.

The lesson: if you pray, expect God to answer.

Another funny story: Moses and God have a conversation (and they have a lot of interesting conversations in the Bible). In the beginning of the book of Exodus, God comes to Moses in the burning bush and says, "I have heard *my* people" and / am going to rescue them from slavery in Egypt.

It happens. The Israelites are now free, and Moses is on the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments from God (Exodus 32). The problem is Moses is gone a long time, and the people are getting restless. They are convinced that Moses has died while meeting with God, so they take matters into their own hands. They decide to make a golden calf to give them something to worship.

God notices this while speaking with Moses and says to Moses, "Go down because *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt." Remember, God originally said to Moses the Israelites were "my people." Do you remember when you raised your children, and you were having a bad day with them. Your spouse comes home and you say, "YOUR children have been acting very badly." You did that, right?

Moses comes right back at God and says, "Lord, why should your anger burn against *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt..." They sound just like a married couple! Neither one of them wanted the Israelites at that moment.

Moses goes down the mountain and says to Aaron, his right hand man who is supposed to be watching the children, "What did these people do to you, that you led them into such great sin?"

Aaron deflects his part of the action by saying one of funniest lines in scripture: The people gave me their gold and I threw into the fire..."and out came this calf!" Really. Just like that.

Oh, how we don't want to take responsibility for our actions, but the lesson to learn: God can be fed up with us, but God never gives up on us.

Abraham and Sarah (For those of you who think the OT is boring, think again. You are finding out today it can be really funny): Three messengers from God approach Abraham and tell him he and Sarah are going to have a child. The funny part is Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah is 89.

If you turn to the NT, when telling this story about Abraham, it says this: "he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead" (Romans 4:19). What a mean thing to say. The NT says it not once, but twice (also in Hebrews 11:11-12).

Back to Sarah. She overhears this conversation and begins to laugh. This is absolutely ridiculous that at her age, she would have a baby. The messenger of God hears her laughing, and in a cute conversation, the angel says, "Why did Sarah laugh?" Sarah says, "I did not laugh." The angel: Yes, you did.

No, I didn't.

Yes, you did.

The angel is having a little fun with Sarah.

Lesson: This is for all of us in a retirement community: we think our bodies are as good as dead, but God still uses us anyway.

Did you know that the Bible has a toilet joke? It is in the OT.

Elijah, the prophet of God, had a contest with 450 prophets of a false god named Baal. The contest was to see which God would answer a prayer: Elijah's God or Baal. They both build an altar to their god to see which god would consume the sacrifice on the altar.

The prophets of Baal go first. They danced and sang for hours, calling out to their god and even cut themselves, trying to get the attention of their god, with no result. Finally, Elijah who is watching all of this makes fun of them: Shout louder. Perhaps your god is in deep thought, or busy, or sleeping or "relieving himself" on the toilet (1 Kings 18:27).

Eventually it is Elijah's turn, and God consumes the altar with fire. The people bow down and say, "The Lord is indeed God."
Lesson: there is only one God.

Here is another example of God's humor: the Israelites were using the Ark of the Covenant as a good-luck charm in battle; in other words, they were trusting the Ark rather than God. So, God teaches them a lesson by having their enemy, the Philistines, capture the Ark.

The Philistines take the Ark and place it in their temple before an idol of their god called Dagon. They came into the temple the next day, and found Dagon had fallen over flat on his face before the Ark. They set him back up. The next morning, there he was again on the ground before the Ark, but this time he had his hands and head cut off (1 Samuel 5:1-5).

They gave the Ark back.

Lesson: Ain't no God like our God.

Back to the NT: the Apostle Paul is preaching (Acts 20). And he goes on and on, hour after hour, into the night. There was a boy named Eutychus who was sitting in an open window, listening to the Apostle Paul. Paul went on so long that the boy fell asleep and fell out of the window. This got Paul to stop preaching! I guess this is a lesson for preachers: be careful how long you talk.

The book of Proverbs is a good place to go for some interesting sayings: Proverbs 21:19 Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife.

Proverbs 11:22 says, "Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman who shows no discretion."

(You need to keep in mind that this was written by King Solomon who had hundreds of wives. I guess he had some experience in this area.)

Proverbs 22:13 The lazy person claims, “There’s a lion out there! If I go outside, I might be killed!” Try that excuse the next time you want to get out of something.

I encourage you to listen for the humor in the Bible. It says in Ecclesiastes, there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (3:4). The Bible need not always be serious. Look for the laughter by the One who created it. For God “will take great delight in you...he will rejoice over you with singing” (Zephaniah 3:17). Amen.