

~ A JOKE A DAY ~  
KEEPS THE DOCTOR AWAY  
METAPHORS & MIRTH TO MAKE THE HEART MERRY



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REV. DR. MARSHALL L. HOFFMAN

REDEMPTION   
PRESS

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Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA 98022

Toll Free (844) 2REDEEM (273-3336)

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ISBN 13: 978-1-68314-517-2 (Paperback)

978-1-68314-518-9 (ePub)

978-1-68314-519-6 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2017954222

A merry heart does good, like medicine,  
but a broken spirit dries the bones.  
(Prov. 17:22 NKJV)



# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all those followers of the Way who would like to put *fun* back into the *fundamentals* of the faith.





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## INTRODUCTION

# BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH THERE IS THE MANNA OF MIRTH

During their forty years of wandering through the wilderness, before entering the Promised Land, the Israelites were sustained by a mysterious phenomenon they described as *Manna*. You can read all about it in the sixteenth chapter of Exodus and the eleventh chapter of Numbers. The word *Manna* in Hebrew is an interrogative pronoun, which means “what?” Children used it a hundred times a day. “*Abba manna?*” (“Daddy what is this?”) “*Emma manna?*” (“Mommy what is that?”). So, the phrase, “it is Manna,” literally means “It is, but what is it?”

Up until this point in their history, the Israelites knew nothing of this bread that seemed to fall from heaven to nourish them in their wilderness wanderings. During their years of Egyptian bondage, their laughter was extinguished by the rigors of slave labor. But when God set them free, a process began in their community of faith that can only be described in these inspired words:

You have turned for me my mourning into dancing. You have put off my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness, to the end that my glory

may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever.

(Psalm 30:11–12)

In my view, that garment of gladness is synonymous with the manna of mirth. Manna is described as “coriander seed.” I picture it as puffed rice, or puffed wheat sprinkled all around. Moses explained it this way: “It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.” So the phrase: “It is manna” literally means, “it is . . . but what is it?”

I feel that way about this mysterious, wonderful journey called life. I know it *is*, but what *is* it? From a Christian point of view, is it not having and maintaining an intimate, personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ? But how can we do this? By availing ourselves of the spiritual manna that God has provided. During his great temptation, our Lord said: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Perhaps one can exist on bread alone, but to really live, one needs a daily supply of every inspired word that is contained in this fabulous library of sixty-six books we call the Bible. To use a merry metaphor, the “coriander seed” on the outside of this heavenly bread is a generous sprinkling of holy hilarity.

“For whatever things were written before were written for our learning” (Rom. 15:4). If I am interpreting this verse correctly, the sixteenth chapter of Exodus was written to instruct us in such a way that we might persevere to the end in hope and humor. Therefore, we should not be surprised if we find teaching points in this passage that we can use to keep our relationship with God as positive as possible.

One teaching point is that the manna of mirth can be fragile. It needs to be handled with care. The original manna appeared mysteriously in the morning protected by the early morning dew. When that covering of dew was evaporated by the desert sun, the manna quickly dissolved and became uneatable.



Take this lesson to heart. The scorching scorn of sarcasm, the mockery of ridicule is too tough for mirth. Skepticism and cynicism can bruise and hurt, but they can't nourish. For that we need manna.

A teacher asked her class, "Why does dew form on the grass in the morning?"

One child replied, "The sun shines on it and it sweats."

Sounds logical, but sweat and heat are not good for manna.

A favorite expression of my youngest son is: "Don't sweat the petty. Pet the sweaty." I like to say, "Before you get out there and get all sweaty, you should 'come to the garden alone while the dew is still on the roses.'" Petting the sweaty requires a delightful sense of humor.

I heard about a young pastor who was preaching up a storm and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, this reminds us of how Jesus fed five people with 5,000 loaves and 2,000 fishes." His head deacon was trying with all his might to keep a straight face and not break out in peals of laughter. Well, the next Sunday the young pastor decided to get even with him. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen this reminds us of Jesus who fed a multitude of 5,000 with five loaves and two fishes." He looked straight at his head deacon and said, "Sir, I bet you couldn't do that!"

The deacon slowly rose to his feet, cleared his throat and said, "Pastor, with all due respect, I think I could, if I had what's left over from last Sunday."

That's the whole point. There is nothing left from last Sunday because stress and strain melts any surplus.

Like the original manna, we need to gather a day's supply on a daily basis. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). Or as a child prayed it: "Give us this day our deli bread." Remember, seven days without this bread makes one week.

Another teaching point: The manna of mirth may be one of our best resources in extricating ourselves from the mire of murmuring.

Have you ever asked why it took the nation of Israel forty years to reach the Promised Land? At no time were they ever more than four or five weeks from the Jordan River. By marching straight west, they could have reached their destination in one month, not forty years. What hindered them?

As I see it, they kept failing the test of gratitude. So, they spun their wheels, went around in circles of dissatisfaction and a whole generation died off in the wilderness. You might say, they got mired in the mud of muttering.

No matter how much God did for them, it was never quite enough; they could always find something to gripe and grumble, moan and groan about.

You remember the details. They were bellyaching because it was hot during the day. So, God put a mysterious cloud cover over them to protect them from the desert sun. They were griping because it was cold and dark at night. God turned that cloud cover into a pillar of fire at night. He provided water from the rock and used an east wind to blow quail into their encampment when they mumbled and murmured about not having meat to eat. Finally, Moses said, "What are we that you grumble against us?" (Ex. 16:7)

I am devoting the rest of my life to turn my griping into gratitude, my murmuring into melody. I want to spend my days not bellyaching but singing the praises of God. Unfortunately, too many of us are stalled at that first test, the test of gratitude. A double dose of holy humor can cure that malady.

Let me paint this word picture that may help to turn your frown upside down. Imagine a happy Hebrew homemaker, trying to make the best of life in the desert, working on a cook book entitled, *One Hundred and One Ways to Prepare Manna Without Losing Your Appetite*. Numbers 11:8 describes how innovative they were preparing it in many various ways. Sometimes they mixed it with the oil of olives and made it into

patties. Sometimes they mixed it with honey and used it like candy. They baked, boiled, broiled and fried it.

We too need to develop innovative ways to keep our daily devotions interesting. After all variety is the spice of life.

I heard about a teacher who asked her class, “What are the four seasons?” She expected, fall, winter, Spring, and summer.

One child said, “I only know two, salt and pepper. But sometimes Mom also uses garlic and onions.”

How do we season our days in this wilderness as we march on toward the banks of the Jordan and to the Promised Land? I want to sprinkle into the melting pot of daily drudgery some peppery puns, some salty similes, and how about those one-liners?

Here are some one-liners that will tickle a smile:

Don't let your worries get the best of you; remember, Moses started out as a basket case.

Some people are kind, polite, and thoughtful, until you try to sit in their pews.

Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisers.

It is easier to preach ten sermons than it is to live one.

The good Lord didn't create anything without a purpose, but mosquitoes come close.

When you get to your wit's end, you'll find God lives there. People are funny; they want the front of the bus, middle of the road, and back of the church.

Opportunity may knock once, but temptation bangs on the front door forever.

Quit griping about your church; if it was perfect, you couldn't belong.

If a church wants a better pastor, it only needs to pray for the one it has.

We're called to be witnesses, not lawyers or judges.  
Some minds are like concrete, thoroughly mixed up and permanently set.

Don't wait for six strong men to take you to church.

Forbidden fruits create many jams.

God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called.

God grades on the cross, not the curve.

God loves everyone, but probably prefers "fruits of the spirit" over "religious nuts"!

God promises a safe landing, not a calm passage.

If God is your co-pilot, swap seats!

Prayer: Don't give God instructions, just report for duty!

The task ahead of us is never as great as the Power behind us.

The will of God never takes you where the grace of God will not protect you.



SECTION I



METAPHORS THAT DO GOOD  
LIKE MEDICINE





## THE THERAPY OF LAUGHTER

The three great world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace their origins back to the patriarch Abraham. I would like to refer to Father Abraham in illustrating the therapeutic benefits of laughter.

God kept promising that he and Sarah would have an heir. The years rolled by and nothing happened. Sarah was now well beyond the childbearing years and Abraham was approaching the century mark.

Then one day they were visited by a messenger from heaven. Sarah was inside the tent preparing supper for their special guest when he announced that in nine months she would give birth to a male child. She tried to muffle it but she couldn't help snickering. Abraham laughed out loud.

Without going into the details, I can imagine some giggling coming out of their tent that night after their visitor had departed. Nine months later to the day, their son Isaac was born. His name means "laughter."

Now tell me that holy hilarity, a sanctified sense of humor, is not a strong medicine. "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones" (Prov. 17:22 KJV). Why is a merry heart

such a good medicine? One reason, in my view, is it keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously.

When I worked on a psychiatric ward, there was an absence of laughter; everyone took themselves so seriously. Some had delusions of grandeur. One of the signs of a healthy mind is the ability to smile at ourselves and see the humorous side of everything we do.

The medicine of a merry heart not only cures us from an exaggerated sense of self-importance, it tends to put space between us and the traumatic experiences in our lives. It acts as a buffer zone to absorb some of their bad vibrations.

One of my favorite illustrations is the beloved clown, the comic genius, Red Skelton. He had a tragic childhood full of neglect and abuse. Turning to comedy, rather than chemicals as his drug of choice, saved him. When he made people laugh, it cushioned all those bad memories and enabled him to face the future with a smile. When I would watch him on TV he would have me in stitches most of the time. Who can forget his character, Clem Kadiddlehopper?

There's nothing like a merry heart to medicate you from the remorse and regrets of the woulda-coulda-shoulda syndrome.

A merry heart is not only good for the spirit, but also for the body. It not only adds life to our years in a spiritual sense, it can also add years to our life in a physical sense.

Did you notice the last phrase of our proverb that says, "A broken spirit drieth up the bones." You want to lubricate those old bones? The Laughing Liturgist's prescription is a big dose of a merry heart.

A cardiologist told me that everything works better when mixed with a cheerful attitude. Your cardiovascular system, your blood pressure, and everything else responds to genuine happiness.

Grandma's philosophy was "The bitterest medicine is the best." She felt the more bitter the medicine, the more benefit it would have. So she had her bottle of cod liver oil ready for everything—headache,

temperature, cough—it was time for cod liver oil to come to the rescue. “Open wide,” she would say and slip in a tablespoon of that magic elixir. When she saw my face all screwed up in a grimace, she would slip in a teaspoon of honey. Years later I thought of her when I saw the movie *Mary Poppins* and heard Julie Andrews sing “Just a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down in a most delightful way.”

Life has some bitter pills for us to pop. I want to recommend a merry heart that makes those bitter pills more tolerable.