

Laughing Matters

Having Godly Gallows Humor

February 1, 2026



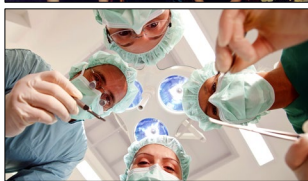
Today we're learning how **laughing at death can be worshipping the Lord!** Cuz how we *react* to this *reality* can reveal the current *state* of our *spirituality*. So, **Are you taking death too seriously?**



Last Sunday, we got in the “way-back” machine to hear how our weekly “last note to the lost soul” started in 1998 after Bruce preached a message that *moved* someone to ultimately *reconsider Jesus*. And though I *loved* it, to paint a better picture of *that* pastor, I’d like to read something *else* he said in the Christmas message from that *same* year:



If I could wish just one thing for everyone here – what would it be? I decided I couldn't wish for a personality thing like happiness – that's too simple. It had to be something practical and physical that would cause change. Money? Lots of money? That's where my mind jumps first. But then I think about all the people who win the lottery and their lives are ruined rather than helped. And then it hit me. Something you'd all benefit from. It'd improve every aspect of your lives: Your relationships, faith, ability to appreciate; everything! It's simple: A terminal illness!



That's your pastor! So, thank the Lord he immediately *clarified* by saying he'd just want you to *live* with the diagnosis for a *while* but *then* be declared *healthy* again – cuz he didn't want you *dead*, he just wanted the *change* that comes with *that* mindset. Well, like I said last time we talked, I *got* the Christmas gift Bruce wished for *me* 28 years ago! Cuz since December, I've been riding the “*what if*” rollercoaster while waiting for my *prognosis* after a *cancer diagnosis*! And in case you weren't here – it's the *best* bad news, PTC, totally treatable, and I'm having surgery *this* Wednesday! So, praise God! But praise God for the weeks of *wondering* as well! Cuz sure enough, **the threat of death changes how you look at life!** The *arguments*, *anxiety*, and *aggravation* in my life suddenly seemed *stupid*. And the *significance* of the *people*, *purpose*, and *priorities* in my life suddenly seemed *simple*. And *of course*, it brought my *faith* to the front of the line. Cuz,



[Like we're told:] Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. [So, I was.] – Matthew 10:28 NIV



Cuz **life-threatening fear naturally exposes the source and strength of our faith** the way a *fall* shows the *strength* of a rock-climber's *rope*! And since every brush with *mortality* reveals our belief's *reliability* – *death* is one of God's greatest *tools*; cuz whether it's *comforting* or *concerning*, **death tests the truth you trust!** And **your truth is trustworthy if feeling fragile builds strength!** Cuz only *real truth* has *real power* you can *rely on*!

And *if it is real*, it's *natural* to be *intimidated* by *superior* power; but it only feels *concerning* if you suspect you're in *opposition*; cuz **even overwhelming power feels comforting when it's on your side!**

[Which is one of *many* reasons why] The fear of the LORD leads to life; [cuz when we place *real faith* in *real power*,] *then one rests content, untouched by trouble.* – Proverbs 19:23 NIV

And as that *rest* grows our *trust* that God only uses *His* overwhelming power for *our good* – it transforms into *love*. And love gives “fear” *new* meaning – cuz the *power* no longer *worries* you – it only *encourages* and *guides* you. And though we should always fear the *potential* of *real* power,

There is no fear in *love*. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with *punishment*. The one who fears [that way] is not made perfect in love. – 1 John 4:18 NIV

So when our *tests* grow into *trust*, and our *trust* grows into love – we may *not be afraid* of how God’s power will *hurt* us – but we should still *tremble* at *how* God’s power will *change* us. The way it’s *natural* to fear the power of a person with a *knife* – but it’s a *bad* fear if they’re an *enemy* and it’s a *good* fear if they’re a *doctor*! So, when Jesus said to *fear* the One who can *destroy* more than our physical *body* – He’s *also* saying to **only trust the One who can save more than our physical body!**



It’s only when we fearfully trust the *fake* power of *fake* truth that worry rules our life; cuz *deep down* we know we’re putting faith in an *unloving* and therefore *unreliable* hope. And that’s the thing about *fear*. Fear isn’t just an emotion; it’s a form of *belief*. Cuz **fear and faith both require belief in something you can’t see.** *Fear* believes the unseen *future* contains *something* that will *harm* me – but *faith* believes the unseen future contains *someone* that will *save* me. Which means love makes all the difference. And that’s why reminders of our *mortality* are so *essential* – they’re a *preview* of the death that’s part of everyone’s future – and they give us an honest snapshot of the *power* of *our* belief.



And when *love* leads you to believe that the *light* and *life* of *God* has *more* power than the *darkness* and *death* of *this world* – you won’t *fear* it – you’ll do the *opposite*, **you’ll laugh at it!** Which is *how* I read *Paul’s* tone *here*:

"Where, O *death*, is your *victory*? Where, O *death*, is your *sting*?" ... [Did you *lose* it? *Well*,] Thanks be to God! *He* gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let *nothing* move you. – 1 Corinthians 15:55-58 NIV

Not even *death*! Cuz y’see – **death is beneath us when God’s above us!** And if it ever tries to *scare* us, *laughing* at it *reminds* us of *that truth*! And *since* our *soul* is *hardwired* with that truth, whether we’re in *hospitals*, *funerals*, *cancer clinics*, or *war zones*... people crack jokes. So much so, that we even have a *name* for it: **gallows humor.** It’s a reflexive *reaction* to *devalue* death when it *tries* to assert *its* authority over *us*, even when the noose is *around* our neck! Cuz our *spirit* can’t *contain* its *contempt* for *false fear* – so it *leaks out* as *laugh* in the face of *all bullies* and *liars*! Paul’s *spirit* is *fighting* death by *mocking* death – cuz **laughing at death doesn’t deny it – it disarms it!** It’s *not* saying it death doesn’t *hurt* or warrant *grief*; it laughs at death to *strip* it of its *power* and *put* it in *its place*.

And *that’s* the difference between *godly* *gallows humor* and *worldly escapism*. **Christians don’t laugh cuz death isn’t real – we laugh cuz death isn’t in control.** And *gallows humor* *isn’t* a *nervous habit* or coping mechanism; it’s a *protest* where your *soul* says, **Death can be serious but it can’t be my King!**

And it's *my* favorite part of being a *Christian* with *cancer*! Cuz it's an *opportunity* to remind *everyone* involved in my treatment that **true life is no laughing matter – but death is!** So, when I went to my first thyroid *ultrasound*, the lady is *slow* and *solemn*, knowing *what* we're looking for – and as she *quietly* starts *moving* the machine to find a better picture, I say, **"So... is it a girl or a boy!"** And she *barely* giggles cuz I think her *human* felt mostly *wrong* – but *something* deep inside, felt a little *right*.



And because I want to tell *every* person that the *threat* of *death* is *not* my *God* and encourage *them* to *deny* its *authority*, I can't help but *try* to *undermine* it at every appointment! But to be *honest*, **it's not been easy.**



Cuz, sometimes, the *reality* of the situation just feels unavoidably heavy. Like my *last* appointment where I met my surgeon who walked me through *exactly* what he was going to *do* and all the *real* risk involved in the 6-8 hours of delicately *slicing* and *dicing* my *neck*. *Woof*. Well, I may not *fear* death as my *God* and *King*, but *suddenly* I felt its *weight* as my *enemy* and *obstacle*. **And that's a problem,** cuz you know what the Hebrew word for a *heavy weight* is? *Glory*. And *God* was clear:



"I am the LORD; that is My name! I will not [give] My glory to another"
– Isaiah 42:8 NIV



And every second that we *validate* the weight of *worldly* worries, we're robbing *God* of the glory that *belongs* to Him and *giving* it to a world that *doesn't* deserve it! After all, *down here*, we're told we're a *mist* (JAS 4:14) life's a *shadow* (JOB 8:9) and reality comes *after* this weightless world

For our *light* and momentary *troubles* **[down here]** are achieving for us an eternal *glory* that far *outweighs* them all. **[In the unseen future up there!]** – 2 Corinthians 4:17 NIV

And we've been given Jesus so, when the *weight* of the world *feels* real, we have an *example* that *explains* how to see *through* our burdens instead of giving *them* the *weight* of His *glory*.

[So Jesus said plainly] "Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you *rest*. ... *learn* from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you *will* find rest for your *souls*. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." – Matthew 11:28-30 NIV

God knows how *hard* it is to see *through* the tough stuff when it's right in front of our faces – so when the worries of this weigh you down **let Jesus lighten your load so you can lighten the mood!**

And *remember*, we're *His* body – so **don't forget to turn to each other so He can get to work!** For instance, when I was *waiting* for the CT scan to tell me if my cancer was *treatable* or if it was *"get your affairs in order"* time, I had to tell *Ken* – my co-worker and *friend* who makes the Powerpoint presentation – that I needed him to come in on Saturday. So, in a pretty beat-down voice, I told him about the *diagnosis* and how the *appointments* put me behind – and in an *equally* solemn voice he said, **"You'll do anything to get out of a deadline, huh?"** Boy did I need *that*. Cuz even a *little* laugh makes worldly worry a little *lighter* and makes the *aim* of our *beliefs* a little *righter*. Cuz the truth is, **fear grows in the dark. Faith grows in the light.** And **laughter turns the lights on.**

Now, I'm *not* saying laughter *itself*, is *faith* – I'm saying laughter *helps* us to see fear and death for what they really *are* – *loud, obnoxious, and hostile* terrorists... who are about three inches tall.



But as you well know, they're *still* pretty *convincing*! For instance, I spent a long time making this sermon's title picture cuz I thought it really communicated the core of what I was trying to say – but *then*, a *little* voice kept making me *afraid* to use it. Cuz it *could* feel a little *flippant* for such a *heavy* subject and *offend* someone – and then I heard myself say it, **“for such a heavy subject.”** And I thought, **“There I go again!”** Cuz if a simple *picture* has the *power* to scare me into silence – then I've already given *fear* a little *throne* in my *heart*. And as much as I *wanted* the voice to be *spiritual maturity* cautioning me about *sensitivity* – I *know* that *wasn't* it – cuz, I *meant* for it to be *uncomfortable* – *that's the message*! I was just worried whether you'd still like me after being abrasive! Cuz *this* world tries to make us *afraid* to tell *uncomfortable truths*! So, I'm sorry, but we *need* to acknowledge this is essentially as good as it gets down here. None of us get out of here *alive*, there's already a noose around every neck, and only *God* knows *when* the floor *drops*. And as *dark* as that sounds to *earthly* ears it sounds like freedom to *eternal* ears. Cuz once you see that death is *unavoidable*, you'll *stop* wasting time giving this world *attention* and *start* living a life with the real *weight* of a real *future* with a real *God* who has the real *power* to save your real *soul*!

Y'know, every week, you all come here and we ask, **“How's everyone doing?”** and we all *answer*, **“Pretty good – for down here!”** And you know *why*? We're not just being *cute*, we're making a *confession*. We're saying *down here*, where *everything* is a *struggle* that ends in *death*, pain may be *normal*, but despair is a *choice*. **“Pretty good for down here”** is gallows *humor* with heavenly *hope* baked into it. It's a *little* tongue-in-cheek *joke* to minimize the power this place has over us. And it's a way to say we *see through* this shadow world cuz *Jesus* already gave us the *real* picture:

[Cuz He said:] I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In *this world* you *will* have trouble. But take heart! I *have overcome* the world. [Get it?] – John 16:33 NIV

The joke is: every *noose* is actually God's *lifeline*! Cuz down here, **death may be inevitable but real life is always available.** And how we *live*, who we *love*, what we *worship*, and *why* we *laugh* are all ways we can build the *perspective* that we *need* to see *past* the *false* power of *this* place.

So I'll ask again: **are you taking death too seriously?** That is, are you giving it too much *authority*; too much *weight*; too much *glory*? If so, well I also wish you get diagnosed with terminal disease – *temporarily*. Not because I want you *dead*, but cuz I want you to have *clarity*. The kind that makes you *laugh* at death instead of *fearing* it – not because death *isn't* *serious*, but because it *isn't* *sovereign*! And *here's* the good news: **you already have a terminal disease!** We're *all* temporarily suffering from a deadly case of *“life!”* And if *that* ain't funny, I don't know *what is*! But I *do* know *this*: death ain't *real* cuz death ain't *final*. *Fear* gives it power, and *laughter* takes it away cuz **laughter is the sound of hope refusing to die.** So, the next time *any* worldly worry like *mortality* makes itself *known*, let it know who's *boss* with an fearless *zinger*, cuz the *gallows* only win – when you're *silent*.

Father God, thank You for loving me in spite of my sin; forgive me and cleanse me by the sacrifice of Your Son, my Savior; and free me and lead me by Your Spirit and Word, as I seek to trust and follow Jesus Christ, as the Lord of my life. Amen.