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Punch Line

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Punch Line

Abstract

"God takes everything Abraham says, including the laughter, and turns it all into the promise."

Posting about God's sense of humor from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-punch-line/>

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Punch Line

 [all in allthings.org/the-punch-line/](http://allthings.org/the-punch-line/)

Ethan Brue

December 19,
2016

Daily Scripture Texts

[1 Samuel 2:1-10](#)

[Genesis 17:15-22](#)

[Galatians 4:8-20](#)

Laughter. It comes in different forms. The child's giggle. The guffaw. The roar. The snort. These involuntary forms, like heartbeats and hiccups, come without an agenda. They just happen. These are laughter in its truest form. Then there are also the artificial forms of laughter. The forced stuff. This is laughter with an agenda. Artificial laughter can be of the malignant variety, such as laughter to dismiss, discourage, cover-up, refute, or belittle. It can also be benign, like the artificial laughter required of a knock-knock joke—the age-old jokes that are only funny if children tell them.

I'd like to give Abraham the benefit of the doubt in Genesis 17, but I find this difficult. By the look of it, Abraham's laughter is not involuntary laughter. His under-the-breath laughing at God seems downright inappropriate, even if it is expected on the basis of reason. But remember, this is not the story of Abraham; it is the story of God preparing to enter his world in a very childish way. In other words, God writes the Christmas program; Abraham is just saying his lines.

In Genesis 17, God tells a cosmic knock-knock joke. Knock-knock jokes by definition are predictable, at least in their form. They go like this...

1. Joke teller draws the unsuspecting participant into joke ("Knock-knock")
2. Rational listeners smile, roll their eyes, and say under their breath what they know they are supposed to say ("Who's there?")
3. Joke teller invites reaction with the next response (e.g. "Hanna")
4. With mild anticipatory laughter, a listener obediently requests clarity of identity, often prompted by the joke teller ("Hanna who?")
5. Joke teller turns the listener's response into the punch line of the joke itself (e.g. "...Hanna partridge in a pear tree!")

Listeners laugh as best they can. It would be rude not to. The joke, it seems, is always on them.

Typical of adults, Abraham is a slow learner. He needs to be led along, cued into the joke, and told what to say at the appropriate time. It goes something like this...

1. God draws the unsuspecting Abraham into the joke—"Knock-knock...Sarai will have a son."
2. Abraham responds—"Sarai who?"
3. God invites again with a response—"Sarai, your wife, who will now be Sarah."

Here's where the joke bogs down and God needs to cue the participant again. Abraham laughs courteously and briefly forgets that he is in the midst of a comedy narrative. He responds that he already has a son named Ishmael. Patiently, God whispers that he is supposed to say, "Son who?"

1. Abraham obediently responds—"Son who?"

2. God delivers the punch line that, like any good knock-knock joke, weaves the listener's own cued responses into the punch line itself.

The punch line goes like this. God takes everything Abraham says, including the laughter, and turns it all into the promise. What is even more over-the-top is that he takes Abraham's untimely interruption of the joke and creatively weaves it into the punch line itself. God says, not only will you be blessed with laughter (Isaac), but Ishmael will be blessed as well, and for that matter, I will bless the entire world while I am at it. I will do it through this covenant I am making through you, the unsuspecting butt of this cosmic comedy.

When very young children tell knock-knock jokes, they often improvise and tend toward excessive elaboration. Imaginations runs wild. The longer the punch line, the better.

Whenever God comes to the world in childish form, imagination runs wild...stars, donkeys, angels, shepherds, wise men, you name it...everyone and everything is in the elaborate punch line. We all laugh. It would be rude not to. The joke, it seems, is always on us. Thanks be to God.