

GEN 1:1-2; DEUT 32:11-12; JOB 38:8-9; GEN 2:18; PS 121:1-4; MATT 23:37-39—
THE MOTHERHOOD OF GOD

INTRO: Today is Mother's Day. It's one of those odd holidays or special days. It's one day you have to take your mother to brunch or lunch—and please be sure to buy the roses that are for sale in the lobby. If you are not familiar with the origin of Mother's Day, let me give you a brief background: Mother's Day in America was first celebrated in 1908, when Anna Jarvis held a memorial for her mother at St Andrew's Methodist Church in Grafton, West Virginia, which now holds the International Mother's Day Shrine. Her campaign to make "Mother's Day" a recognized holiday in the US began in 1905, the year her mother, Ann, died. Ann Jarvis had been a peace activist who cared for wounded soldiers on both sides of the Civil War, and created Mother's Day Work Clubs to address public health issues. Anna wanted to honor her mother and all mothers, reasoning that they were "the person who has done more for you than anyone in the world."

Ironically, although Anna was successful in founding Mother's Day, she became resentful of the commercialization of the holiday. By the early 1920s, Hallmark and other companies had started selling Mother's Day cards. Jarvis believed they were exploiting the idea of Mother's Day for profit. As a result, she organized boycotts of Mother's Day, and even threatened lawsuits against the companies. Who knew?

However we do it, with cards or lunch or flowers or whatever, there is a high sentimentality factor to Mother's Day that is not present on most other special days. On the other hand, Mother's Day also is a day that can be painful for many people. Perhaps you wanted to be a mother but couldn't be; or you had an abortion or have lost a child; or your mother is dead; or she may be alive but you don't have a good relationship with her; or perhaps your mother was, quite frankly, not a very good mother.

The fact is that none of us is perfect. We all fail in many ways—as mothers, or fathers, or children, or any role we play in this life. But that fact—our failures, our sin, our inadequacy—should lead us to ask: "Is there someone, anyone, who does *not* fail?" And the answer is "yes," there is one—and only one—who does not fail, and that is God.

God reveals who he is and what he is like in Scripture and in person—the person of Jesus Christ. There are a number of passages in the Bible, including direct statements by God and Jesus, that reveal a maternal aspect of God's nature or character I call "the Motherhood of God." Now before you start getting too nervous and wondering where I am going with this, let me assure you of two things: (1) This has nothing to do with the Virgin Mary—we are talking about what God himself is like; and (2) I am well aware that God is our *Father*, not our mother, and we pray "Our Father who art in heaven" not "Our Mother who art in heaven." However, even calling God our "Father" is a metaphor—because God is Spirit, he does not have a sex or gender.

PROP: What we will see is that what I call the "motherhood of God" expresses the relational aspects of God and shows us the best of what it means to be a human being.

O/S: We will look at three sets of passages and see what the motherhood of God involves and how it relates to us.

I. First set of passages show us that God is the giver of life and our nurturer

We will begin at the beginning, **Gen 1:1-2** where it says the Spirit of God "hovered" or "moved" over the face of the waters. **[READ]** In **Gen 1:2** God is being described in very motherly terms. One commentary says word "hovered" or "moved" in **Gen 1:2** literally means "**continued brooding over it, as a fowl does when hatching eggs.**" The word translated "hovered" or "moved" is also found in **Deut 32:11-12** and is translated "flutters" **[READ]**. Jewish translator and commentator Robert Alter says that, in light of its use in **Deut 32:11**, "hovering" in **Gen 1:2** is like "**an eagle fluttering over its young and so might have a connotation of [giving birth] or nurture.**"

In fact, God has an almost maternal *attitude* toward his creation. We know that because God himself describes creating the world as a mother giving birth and wrapping her baby in swaddling clothes. In **Job 38:8-9** God says to Job **[READ]**.

This "motherly" role of God (as I am calling it) applies to all things, even at the individual level. **Ps 139:13** and **Job 10:11** both say that God "**knit us together**" in our mother's womb. Of all the expressions the Bible could have used for how God was active in forming our bodies, don't you think it is interesting that in both Psalms and Job this very maternal image of a woman knitting a garment is used? What does that say about God's care and concern for us whom he creates? It tells us that God is not just a remote creator—but is intimately involved in and cares about his creation.

In addition to creating the world, God then nurtured it into maturity, wholeness, and completion by bringing order out of chaos, light out of darkness, and life where there was no life. Just as God nurtured the world he created into *physical* maturity, he also nurtures us into *spiritual* maturity. For those of us who are Christians, this is called "sanctification." **Rom 8:29** tells us that the whole point of our lives is to be

conformed to the image of Jesus Christ—IOW, to be like him: to think like him, act like him, have his values, and his priorities. God is the one who, by His Spirit, is actively working in us to bring about this transformation just as he was active in knitting us together in the first place.

Giving life and nurturing are particularly characteristic of mothers. But since God has no sex or gender, these attributes—in one way or another—are applicable to all people since we are all made in the IOG. Let’s briefly look at being a giver of life and a nurturer in our own lives.

- Giver of life. The idea of being a giver of life goes beyond just begetting children. Jesus said, **“I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.”** “Abundant life” refers to life in its abounding fullness of joy and strength of mind, body, and soul. When we realize the blessings God has given us (mercy, peace, love, grace, wisdom, etc.) and share them with our others, that’s when we truly have abundant life. So we need to ask ourselves: Are we agents for people’s joy? Do they feel alive when they are with us? Do we give to others the blessings that God has given to us? To the extent we do that, we become givers of life just as God is the ultimate giver of life.
- Nurture. To nurture is to care for and encourage the growth and development of someone or something. Interestingly, the word “nurture” is another maternal word—it is from the Latin *nutritus*, which means “to suckle, or nourish.” We all know we need to nurture our kids to help them to grow up to be good, self-sustaining adults. But, again, the same thing applies in all important areas of life. We need to care for the growth and development of our marriages, our friendships, our careers, our spiritual lives. All of those things take time and effort, and they are all competing against each other for our time and energy. That is why it is vital that we have the mind, the values, and the priorities of Jesus so that we will be able to properly prioritize our lives so that we nurture the important things, the things that will last—not spend major time, money, and effort on the unimportant things.

II. Second set of passages show us that God is our helper and sustainer

We’ll begin here with **Gen 2:18 [READ]** The “helper,” of course, refers to Eve, Adam’s wife, whom Adam called **“the mother of all living.”** **Gen 2:18** is the first mention of the word “helper” or “help” in the Bible. Often the first reference to something in the Bible is important. I believe it is here where “helper” is referring to the first woman, wife, and mother.

What does that have to do with God? A note in my ESV Bible points out that the word “helper” does not imply that Eve was inferior to Adam because elsewhere in the Bible, God takes on *himself* the description of a wife and mother by calling himself our “help” and our “helper.” In fact, in **Gen 2:18** Robert Alter translates the word as “sustainer” and says that **“‘Help’ is too weak because it suggests a merely auxiliary function, whereas ‘ezer [the Hebrew word here] elsewhere connotes active intervention on behalf of someone.”** For example, the same word translated “helper” in **Gen 2:18** is translated “help” in **Ps 121:1-4 [READ]**.

As was true with God as the giver of life and our nurturer, God as our “helper” and “sustainer” applies to all areas of life. **Heb 1:3** says **“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining [or ‘upholding’] all things by his powerful word.”** God through Christ is the one who is upholding and sustaining everyone and everything every minute of every day. That is why **Ps 121:3-4** said that he never slumbers or sleeps.

How much like a mother is that? I recall that back in my high school years, when I would get home late, very often my mother would still be up and awake. I didn’t much like that then. But it communicated that she was concerned and still cared about me in a way that was different than if it had been my father who had still been up and awake. Human fathers can be remote and harsh in a way that most mothers are not. But what I am calling the “motherhood of God” is telling us that God is not a remote or harsh God. Or, to put it another way, the “motherly” virtues of God show us that God is, in fact, the *perfect* father—having all the authority and strength of a father and all the nurturing and sustaining virtues of a mother. He cares about us. And he is there for us, no matter when, no matter where, and no matter what we have done.

- Let’s briefly consider what it means to be a “helper” or “sustainer” in our lives. Take a look at marriage. In **Gen 2:18** Eve was created as Adam’s “helper” (or as Alter translated it, “sustainer”). Although that word “helper” does *not* imply that Eve was inferior to Adam, it *does* imply that Adam was *inadequate* in-and-of himself. That’s the very reason why **v.18** goes on to say, **“I will make a helper fit for him.”** A footnote in my ESV Bible says, **“The expression [‘fit for him’] assumes a complementary relationship; what he lacked she supplied and vice versa. Both share the IOG.”**

Anyone who is married knows that this is the way it works, or at least this is the way it is supposed to work. In my marriage, Nancy has a great many likes and strengths that I don’t have, and I have certain likes and strengths that she doesn’t have. And it’s not just because she’s a woman and I’m a man, but it’s how we’re wired. For example, she enjoys and is very good at keeping the books and financial records whereas I would find that incredibly tedious. On the other hand, I enjoy cooking more than she does. She often says, “I cooked for the first 30 years of our marriage, now he can cook for the next 30,” and we both are happy with that (although I hasten to add, she’s a very good cook in her own right). So

the relationship as a whole is sustained and strengthened because we do the things we like and are good at for the sake of our relationship and our mutual benefit.

But, again, the concept of helping and sustaining applies beyond marriage. For example, are you mentoring someone? When I'm in Africa I frequently tell the church leaders I work with that one mark of a good leader is to recognize talents and abilities in others and raise up new leaders. That helps the younger person realize his or her potential and helps and sustains the church or ministry itself.

This leads to the final passage we will look at:

III. Matt 23:37-39 shows that Christ is the ultimate mother [READ]

In this passage Jesus is describing himself by using the image of a mother—specifically, a hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings. Notice how similar the imagery he uses is to the imagery of the bird in **Deut 32** which “**flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them.**”

Here in Matt 23 we see Jesus using a very tender image. It is an image that evokes all of the dearest things we think of when we hear the word “mother”: tenderness, warmth, comfort, protection, safety, love, home, family, relationship, shelter. And Jesus is saying, “**This is what I want to be for you.**” But Jerusalem rejected him, and so judgment fell—and Jesus did not prevent that from happening.

What does this tell us? Even though Jesus specifically compared himself to a mother hen—with all her tenderness, love, longing, and concern—he was prepared to allow judgment to fall on Jerusalem. IOW, sometimes the most loving thing we can do is to let someone dear to us—a child, a friend—bear the consequences of their actions instead of enabling them to continue on a self-destructive path. That is known as “tough love.” But that comes only at the end of a long process of demonstrating love, of being there for the person again and again, of keeping the lines of communication open, of doing all the things that Jesus did to show that he was like the hen who cared for her chicks. And even after judgment comes, a mother does not sever the bond of love.

That's not easy to do. It's not easy to see someone destroy himself or herself. But ultimately it is *not* in the person's best interest if you continually enable them to go down the wrong path.

And that leads to the last aspect of Jesus as the mother hen—self-sacrifice. Although he let a *temporal* judgment fall on Jerusalem, Jesus came to earth in order that *he* would bear God's *eternal* judgment so that *we don't* have to bear that judgment. He came to live the life we should have lived, die the death we should have died, and bear the judgment for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay for but never could—so that we could go free and have eternal life, and not face the second death.

In doing that, Jesus was acting just like the mother hen in a Nigerian story: “**There was a young boy named Olu who had a pet white chicken. They became great friends and inseparable companions. One day the hen disappeared and Olu cried and cried. Then after three weeks the white hen returned to the compound with seven beautiful chicks. The boy was overjoyed.**

One day late in the dry season the older boys set a ring of fire to the bush area outside the village. Everyone stood outside the ring as the fire burned toward the center. The purpose was to drive little animals such as rabbits and small antelopes out of the circle. Then the boys would catch or kill the fleeing animals. When the fire was over, Olu and his friends walked through the smoldering embers. The boy noticed a heap of charred feathers and smelled burned flesh. It looked like the remains of a bird that had not escaped from the fire. Then Olu realized in horror it was his beloved white hen, now all black and burned to death. But then came the sounds of chicks. The mother hen had covered them with her body and they were still alive and well. The mother had given her life for her children. She died that they might live.”

Sometimes mothers do that. They sacrifice themselves for their children. Self-sacrifice is probably the most motherly virtue of all. Mothers do that because they love us—not for the things we might give them or because we are useful to them—but simply because we are their children. Jesus did that. Jesus sacrificed himself for us not because of anything we could give him or do for him but simply because he loves us and we are like helpless chicks who can do nothing to save ourselves.

Is that why we turn to God or Jesus? Or is it because of what we think God will do for us? If we tell our earthly mother “I love you” simply to butter her up so that she will give us things or include us in her will, that's not love at all. In real love, we tell our mother we love her simply because of who she is and as an expression of gratitude for all she has *already* done for us.

It's the same with God. He created us and sustains us and in Christ has done for us what we never could do for ourselves. If you come to him with a calculating eye thinking “if I say certain words or do certain religious things, then he will give me the money, success, and other things I *really* want”—that is the exact *opposite* of love. Just as Jesus loves us for who we are and for what we *cannot* do, so we should love him for who he is and for what he has already done. Then leave the rest in his hands. Like a good mother, he has proven he is trustworthy and has our best interest at heart.

CONCL: Yes, God specifically is *called* “our Father.” But as we have seen in both the OT and the NT, the Bible also *describes* God and Christ as a mother—particularly as a mother bird. That is not by accident. Although Jesus was incarnate as a man, not a woman, God is Spirit—he has no sex or gender. He is the God over all people, and since all people—male and female—equally bear the IOG, God’s nature equally finds expression in motherly as well as fatherly virtues.

Those “motherly” virtues of God express God’s relational aspects and show us the best of what it means to be a human being. They should be demonstrated here on earth by us—men as well as women—because giving life, nurturing, helping, sustaining, protecting, showing love (even “tough love”), and self-sacrifice can be done by us all. If we think seriously about the “motherly” virtues of God (or as I have called it, “the motherhood of God”), and consciously try to apply them in our own lives, people will see Jesus becoming more and more real in us.