



FAITH FAITH IN FOCUS

# Discovering God as Mother

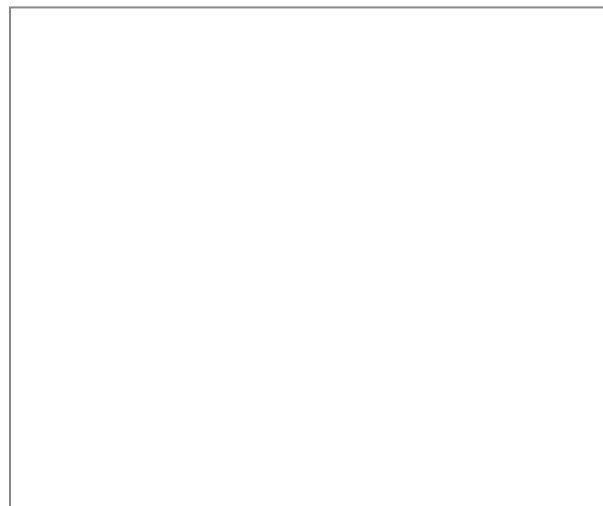
Alyson Rockhold

May 09, 2021

My feet shuffle across the floor as I reluctantly lumber toward my prayer chair. A new day has dawned, but I am not motivated to do my morning devotions. I collapse in my seat and look doubtfully at my journal, Bible and prayer book. *“God, I don’t want to do any of this today. I just want to curl up here and rest a bit.”*

I tense for the old guilt-laden demand that “this is what a good Christian does in the morning.” It never comes. Instead, I sense God’s arms wrapping around me. I hear a gentle invitation to lay down my weary head. In my mind’s eye, I imagine God patting my hair like a mother comforts an overwrought child.

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It is in intimate moments like this that I experience the mothering God. As a child, I would run to my mother with every skinned knee and broken heart. Her acceptance was total, and her presence never failed to soothe me. Now I’m grown, and an ocean separates my home from hers. Still, in moments of sadness and struggle, I long to feel like a child in my mother’s arms: completely loved and totally accepted. I rediscover this in the Lord’s embrace.

*I long to feel like a child in my mother’s arms: completely loved and totally accepted.*

God creates, nurtures and loves us like a mother loves her child. Scripture tells us that God’s love surpasses a mother’s love, because even if a mother could forget the child at her breast, God could never forget us (Is 49:15). I am so grateful for that truth in the moments when I feel lost and alone. God has not forgotten me. God will not abandon me. Even if I fail all the tests of a perfect Christian, the mothering God accepts me as I am.

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As I rest in the divine lap, I let the maternal images of God in the Bible minister to me. They speak to me on a visceral, tangible level of the love of God and provide relatable glimpses into the mystery of divine love. One of my favorite psalms says, “I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is

my soul” (Ps 131:2). I come to God my mother for comfort, not greedily grasping for what God can give me, but for the simple joy of being near my Lord.

Perhaps this is what God meant when he revealed himself to Abram as *El-Shaddai* (Gn 17:1). The word *shad* means “breast” in Hebrew. Could God be calling himself “the breasted one” as some scholars suggest women nourish, satisfy and pour themselves out as they breastfeed their children. This name may hold a promise that God will care for God’s children in the same sacrificial, life-giving way.

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My intercessory prayers change shape as I talk to the mothering God. Several years ago, I had a friend going through a challenging time. She lingered on my prayer list for months, but I often rushed past her name. I didn’t know what to ask of God, so I avoided saying anything at all. Then one day during a rainstorm, I saw a mother hen spread her wings wide to protect her babies. Immediately this prayer sprang to my mind: *“Yes, Lord, wrap your wings around my friend and shelter her from this storm.”*

I found the reference in Ps 91:4: “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings, you will find refuge.” I wrote my friend’s name next to the verse. From then on, when I was at a loss for how to pray for her, I remembered the tender care of that mother hen and trusted that God would shelter and care for my friend in the same way.

Jesus also loved this maternal image of God as a mother hen. There is a moving story of Jesus lamenting that people have turned away from him. He sees the Israelites’ pain and confusion and longs to gather them together as “a hen gathers chicks under her wings” (Mt 23:37).

Referring to God as mother stretches my vocabulary and widens my understanding of the divine. I know that God is spirit, a being beyond male and female. I’ve seen that Scripture uses both masculine and feminine imagery to explain how God relates to us. Yet the female pronouns and descriptors get caught in my mouth, a foreign language new to my tongue. My conservative upbringing did not discuss this realm of theology. I fear some would even judge it as heresy.

But I am not a theologian. “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain” (Ps 139:6). I am merely a child on her mother’s lap.

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The mothering God holds me tight and remembers me always. She protects my loved ones beneath her wings. Her divine body shelters and nourishes me. In her embrace, I am loved and accepted. There I find rest.

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