

THE NURTURE OF GOD
Isaiah 49:13-16; Psalm 91:3-6

I have a great revelation that will come as no surprise to most of you: Men and women are different. As a young man I used to wonder why women couldn't be more like men – then I could understand them. At the same time I heard rumors that women wished men could be more like women because they didn't understand us. A friend of mine, the wife of one of my best friends, e-mailed me something from a Hallmark card entitled: **TOP TEN THINGS ONLY WOMEN UNDERSTAND:** 10. Why it's good to have five pairs of black shoes.// 9. The difference between cream, ivory, buff, ecru and off-white.// 8. Crying can be fun.// 7. Fat clothes.// 6. A salad, diet drink, and a hot fudge sundae make a balanced lunch.// 5. Discovering a designer dress on the clearance rack can be considered a peak life experience.// 4. The inaccuracy of every bathroom scale ever made. // 3. A good man might be hard to find, but a good hairdresser is next to impossible.// 2. Why a phone call between two women never lasts under ten minutes.// 1. And the Number One thing Only Women Understand: Other Women.

As much as we joke around about the differences between men and women, we know there is truth in it. Whenever society has tried to say men and women are the same, conflict arises – it doesn't work. Men and women are not the same. But men and women are to be treated the same, with the same respect, with equal treatment, opportunity and pay in the workplace, in the home and in society. Men and women are equal to but different from each other.

One of the most popular treatments of this is John Gray's Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus. The idea more or less is that we are so different, it's like we're from two different planets. Men are more task oriented – dealing with the physical side of doing something, problem solving, performance; Women are more relationally oriented – dealing with verbal communication, feelings, nurturing relationships. I heard a classic example of this in a young couple, when their 5 year old son was about to touch something hot after being told not to. The young dad said, "Let him touch it and I bet he'll never do it again." The young mom said, "No, I don't want him to get hurt." They are both right – but it depends on whether you ask a man or a woman as to which one was more correct

Where do these differences come from? In the Bible it says that human beings were created in the image of God. It means we all have reflections of the character and personality of God. Dr. Don Joy, one of my seminary professors, believes that the first human that God created might have had all those characteristics whole and complete. But Adam was lonely. So God through divine surgery, split the first Adam into man and woman – adam and adama – each having more strengths in certain areas than the other – each complementing one another to give a more complete understanding of the image of God.

God is neither male or female. That would be creating God in our image. I'm still kind of old school and refer to God with male pronouns, because that is the way

the Scripture refers to Him – that’s the way Jesus referred to Go. Yet God has all the characteristics in their fullest sense of both males and females. We were created in God’s image.

Some Scriptures speak of this. God is nurturing and compassionate just as a mother nurtures and has compassion for her children. It is not that fathers don’t have these characteristics, but overall these traits seem to be stronger in women. And these traits help us understand who God is. There are attributes of God that are best understood in the context of nurture and caring, as a mother cares for her young ones. I want us to look at 4 of these nurturing attributes of God.

1) Our God is a Protecting God. Both men and women are protective of their young, but with a mom, you can hurt her and get away with it, but you start messing with her kids and watch out! In Psalm 91 God is like a mother bird whose wings cover and protect her little ones in the nest:

**4 He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.**

**5 You will not fear the terror of night,
nor the arrow that flies by day,**

**6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,
nor the plague that destroys at midday.**

**7 A thousand may fall at your side,
ten thousand at your right hand,
but it will not come near you. (Psalm 91:3-7)**

We can take refuge in our God who protects us as a mother protects her young.

Years ago, a young mother was making her way across the hills of South Wales, carrying her tiny baby in her arms, when she was overtaken by a blinding blizzard. She never reached her destination and when the blizzard had subsided her body was found by searchers beneath a mound of snow. But they discovered that before her death, she had taken off all her outer clothing and wrapped it about her baby. When they unwrapped the child, to their great surprise and joy, they found he was alive and well. She had mounded her body over his and given her life for her child, proving the depths of her mother love. Years later when that child grew to be a man, David Lloyd George became prime minister of Great Britain, and, without a doubt, one of England's greatest statesmen.

I heard another story on the news last week. A house trailer was destroyed by a tornado. As they dug through the debris, they found the body of a young woman, laying on top of a mattress, as if she were trying to hold it down. Underneath the mattress, rescuers found her two little boys – alive and well.

When no one else can protect, we have a God who loves and protects us. Call on God in your day of trouble

2) Our God is a compassionate God. Understand the difference between compassion and sympathy. Sympathy is when you feel pity, or sorrow for someone else and the distress they are in. Compassion takes that feeling further – you feel the pain with the person, not just for the person. Compassion is expressed in caring action that acts to alleviate that pain.

Holman Bible Dictionary says that the word for compassion in Hebrew used in Isaiah 49:15 is *racham*. It is related to the Hebrew word for "womb" and expresses a mother's or father's love and compassion, a feeling of pity and devotion to a helpless child. It is a deep emotional feeling seeking a concrete expression of love. This word always expresses the feeling of the superior or more powerful for the inferior or less powerful and so it never expresses human feeling for God. The word seeks to bring security to the life of the one for whom compassion is felt.

We live out the quality of compassion when we have endured a hardship in life and can feel with others who go through a similar experience. In 430 B.C. the historian Thucydides wrote, "It was in those who had recovered from the plague that the sick and the dying found most compassion." Our God is a God of compassion. He feels the pain with us, just as Jesus experienced the excruciating suffering of the Cross, and God shows His compassion by concrete expressions of love and care.

3) Our God is a faithful God. A mother's faithfulness to her child will go a long way. Many of us have seen the faithfulness of our mother come through when everyone else gave up on us; We learn very powerful lessons about faithfulness through the faithfulness and loyalty of our mothers. But there is only so far we can go with this as an example. There are far too many examples of child abuse – verbal, emotional or physical inflicted by a parent on a child. There are too many examples of mother's who abort their babies before they are given a chance at life. There are too many examples of mothers who give birth and throw the newborn in a trash bin to die. Isaiah 49:15-16 says:

¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you!

¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me.

God will always be faithful to you. Every time Jesus looks at the nail prints on His hands He remembers you. His faithfulness endures forever.

4) Our God is a comforting God. In Isaiah 66:13 the Lord says of Himself: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem." Someone said: I finally found a Mother's Day card that expressed my feelings for my mother in real terms. It said, "Now that we have a mature, adult relationship, there's something I'd like to tell you. You're still the first person I think of when I fall down and go boom!" There are times we just need to be comforted. Sometimes it helps when we feel overwhelmed to go to God in prayer and ask Him just to hold us close. Picture yourself as a little child climbing into His lap, as He just wraps His arms around you, holds you close and rocks you. Our God is a comforting God.

In the midst of recent tragedies from the earthquake in Haiti and the flooding in Tennessee that took several lives and left so many homeless, how can we say God is like a mother who protects, has compassion, is faithful and shows comfort? I read Elie Weisell's book Night and the loss of faith of those who suffered so greatly in the Holocaust. But then I also read The Hiding Place by Corey Ten Boom and how her faith grew in the Nazi death camps. I don't know what it would be like to have my faith tested through the fires of suffering like that - But I do know that you can ask many of the survivors about these nurturing attributes of God - and many will tell you these nurturing traits of God we only talk about, have made God become more real to them.

Many of us have great examples of a mother's love through our earthly mom's. We hope and pray we, as men and women, might learn from them. Even more do we learn about the One in whose image we were created. We have a God who protects, has compassion, is faithful and shows comfort. As Christians there should be a family resemblance. We will show we are His children when people see those traits alive and active in us.