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EXPERIENCING GOD AS MOTHERLY

By Tim Bulkeley

My previous lecture focused on ideas and called for critical and thoughtful engagement with the material being presented. In this final one, we change mental gears—moving from the head to the heart, from critical thinking to experience.[1] This is not always an easy transition and may perhaps be especially difficult for those who equate worship with singing (although it can also be trying when the medium is still spoken words). To make this lecture even more demanding, occasionally we will change gears back to thinking.

If we are still processing the central ideas of the other lectures and are not yet sure how to respond to them, I ask that, for this one, please leave the processing task temporarily in God's hands. Doing so will allow us to explore some of the possible 'experiencing' corollaries of the ideas presented and take up mental processing and critique of those ideas afterwards.

"Live theology" is lived. In a seminary context, it's too easy to believe that theology is merely about thinking and ideas. We have all those books and journal articles waiting to be read, and essays are marked largely on the clarity and organisation of ideas. Yet theology is not real if it stops at that level. For theology (from the Greek *theos* and *logos*, meaning to talk or think about God), thought about God that does not produce lives that express our love of God is dead. Theology is only real if we live it.

So, if the preceding lectures did lead us to the conclusion that it is appropriate for Christians to "think" about God as motherly, this one explores ways in which we might enable ourselves and others to 'experience' God as mother. It will do this using a few examples.

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[1]Because of this, unlike the previous lectures, there will be almost no footnotes to interrupt our reading and reflecting here. The evidence for what I say here was given in earlier lectures or it comes directly from the Scripture references or from an appeal to experience.

Stop

Why does this matter? We call God "Lord" so often that we sometimes behave as if God was a demanding boss or a teacher checking up to see if we've been good or not. One of the positives in occasionally picturing God as mother helps us to stop and reflect more.

Indeed, God is Lord, is demanding, and is holy, but we ought not to allow the recognition of these attributes to get us stuck in the mode of trying to reach God's standards. We should desire to aim for those standards because we love God, not because we hope or expect to attain good marks. For persons stuck on the treadmill of trying to please God by showing how good they can be, thinking of God as a mother offers a way out. We can only get off the Pharisee treadmill by recognizing that the God we have been trying to please is different. Those of us in theological education know that God is different; and if asked whether God demands that we reach certain standards to be worthy of "his" love, we know the answer with our heads. We probably even preach this gospel. But we do not always act as if we truly believe it. Knowing is not enough, for mere knowledge is not sufficient to change the way we act. Often, what we know with our heads our hearts may tend to deny. We need to change our hearts as well as our heads; we need to experience the Lord in other ways as well.

The word that is translated LORD in the Old Testament is not a title but a personal name, YHWH. It is like calling God "Tim" or whatever one's name might be. The Jews, wanting to avoid breaking the commandment against taking God's name in vain, stopped using the name and said "Lord" instead. One of the ways Israel failed to serve God rightly was that they came to believe that by obeying the commandments they could earn God's favour. Thus, when we use the title "Lord," we ought to somehow make ourselves aware that we are using God's name and expressing our personal and close relationship.

Psalm 131:1-3 A Davidic Song of Ascents

[1]O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, nor are my eyes haughty; I am not concerned with things too great and too difficult for me.

[2]But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul that is with me is like a weaned child.

[3]Israel, hope in the Lord now and forever.

Keep the words of this psalm in mind as I encourage all of us to explore what David was experiencing and then to share that experience. He describes Israel's relationship with God as similar to climbing up on God's knee as a toddler with its mother. God is experienced as mother (the word *'em* is used). The child here is not a baby or small child climbing onto its mother demanding to be fed. Instead, this is a weaned child who is pictured as one not expecting (let alone not demanding) provision of food from the mother.

In the same way, as we seek to copy the psalmist's experience, we are not asking God for things but rather are climbing on God's knee like a small child. Climbing onto mum, it is not because we want something but simply because we want to be close to mum. Do we have the picture? If so, I want us to do something strange. I want us to become quiet and still. Picture the thought of climbing up on God's knee and snuggling close to her. To ensure the experience is vivid, try to answer these questions: Did we climb up? Or did she reach down and lift us? How do we know that she loves us? How, without words, does she express that love?

We need to learn to be in the delightful, dependable presence of God, to practice enjoying God's presence like a small child enjoys its mother's presence. Because God loves us like a daddy and like a mum too, it will take time to explore and discover what this means. Our lives are busy, all sorts of needs pour in, and we risk always approaching God with these needs.

On the morning of this lecture, a friend of mine posted on Facebook that her cousin's baby was in hospital, and she asked for prayer for both baby and mother. Also, during the worship time preceding the lecture, we prayed for a superintendent whose wife had died a day or two before. It is quite right to respond to such requests with prayer, for God desires such. But it is also right to sometimes approach God with no requests, to simply enjoy God's presence.

If all our prayers are requests (i.e., supplication and intercession), that is not right. While parents are happy when their children ask for things they need, asking for things for others is a sign the children are growing into mature human beings; and parents need and want more than this. Since God is like a mother and a father, God wants more from us than just that we ask for things.

Numbers 11:1-15

Using a good recent translation, read first verses 1-11. Try to imagine the scene and what the people mentioned here are thinking and feeling. Why are they complaining? (Be fair to them; after all, sometimes we are less than 'fair' when we complain to God or friends or family! Putting ourselves in their situation....with the same monotonous diet day in and day out, their looking back and remembering the food in Egypt is understandable.) And to whom are they complaining at the start of the passage? Although it is within 'God's hearing,' are their complaints addressed to God?

What does Moses pray in verse 2? (The Bible tells us the circumstances but not the content of his prayer.) Also consider how Moses feels as he starts to pray. To whom do they complain in verse 4? Where do we find out about someone else hearing their complaints? What happens then? Can we understand how God feels? If we were God, what would we be planning at this point?

Now look at the following fairly literal version of verses 11-15, where Moses takes his overburdened feelings to God.

> [11]So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? How have I deserved this? The weight of the whole nation is on me.
> [12]"Did I conceive this whole nation? Did I give birth to them that you say to me, 'Carry them in your arms, as a nurse carries a baby she feeds, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors'?
> [13]"Where am I to get meat to give to this whole nation? For they come whining to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!'
> [14]"I am not able to carry this whole nation alone, they are too heavy for me.
> [15]"If this is how you are going to treat me, kill me at once and do not let me see my misery."

Does Moses' argument here really run like this (as I suggested it does): "God, this isn't my responsibility. I'm not their mother!" Try to list the reasons why this situation is difficult for Moses. Is he angry with God or the people or both? He seems caught between the people's demands, which he cannot fulfill, and God, who does not seem to be listening to their complaints.

Also, notice how the pronouns work in this narrative. Pronouns often express the relationships, and noticing them can draw attention to the interpersonal dynamics of a Scripture passage. This is particularly useful in narratives and in the prophets and letters. Three sorts of pronouns are used here—first person singular ("I," "me"), second person singular ("you"), and third person plural ("they," "them"). "I" and "you" in this prayer refer to Moses and God; this relationship is at the heart of the prayer. But 'they' are also involved, which makes the relationship problematic.

According to Moses, provision is the mother's job. He is not Israel's mother; if anyone is, it's God. Think how often Bible stories tell of God feeding people. . .Moses, Elijah, Jesus, even Peter's vision. Besides the stories, glance through some of the psalms and notice how many of them thank God for providing for the writer's needs.

God the provider is sometimes (as here) pictured as God the Mother. Provision of food and clothing was 'women's work' in the Ancient Near-East; and in many families, it still is. In the Bible, God's provision is not like that of a cafeteria but rather is direct and personal. Notice how this is so in Psalm 23; it is God who prepares the table. In other psalms, we are apt to overlook the direct and personal nature of the provision itself, instead seeing only the goal—that those provided for should be content or even joyfully happy. This too is like a mother providing for her family.

There is a tendency in many cultures to see a father's provision in more distant and enabling ways, while a mother's in more intimate and direct ways. In a caricature, the father earns the money that buys the provisions, but the mother does the shopping and prepares the food. In such cultural settings, a providence envisaged only as fatherly runs the risk of minimizing or overlooking the intimate and personal sort of providence that Christians experience daily.

The Little Things

Sometimes we are tempted to imagine that God only provides for those in "the Lord's work," like missionaries and ministers. The stories we hear in church of special acts of providence are often about persons who are doing something for God and needed something; they prayed and received what was needed. While such stories are important testimonies (and we should keep telling them), the idea that such provision is only for special needs or for special people is wrong.

In Kim Snider's lecture [which will appear in the next edition of this Journal], she quoted a woman who asked for a parking space. Years ago, a colleague told how she had forgotten where she put her keys and asked God for help finding them. I confess that at the time I thought. . .Hasn't God anything better to do than help persons careless enough to forget where they put their keys? I prided myself in trying to avoid making such a mistake by putting things in the same place each time. I believe my attitude was totally wrong…not only the pride, but also that God *does* care about little things. God's care is intimate, even caring about parking spaces (although perhaps not as often as we would like!).

In Matthew 5:45, Jesus claims that God provides for all, the good and the unrighteous alike. One exciting thing about the highly successful Alpha Program[2] is that, even before participants become believers, they are encouraged to pray for one another. Often, the experience of seeing their prayers answered convinces them of the reality of God as one who provides for *all* his children. (Mothers feed *all* their children, not only those who are good or hardworking!)

Many of us may see this unselective providence as fatherly, the reason being that we have been taught about Father God from the Bible. Culturally, however, fathers are usually expected to discipline and reward, while mothers are expected to provide for both good and bad children. That is why we need to put Moses' picture of God the Mother together with Jesus' teachings about sparrows and flowers. God's provision is easy to learn with our heads but hard to believe with our actions. It is also sometimes difficult to be thankful for this daily intimate providence. Children often take mother's provision for granted. (I am sad when I think how often I take God's providence for granted.)

In western culture, people are measured and graded all the time. (I know this is also true of some Asian cultures). Such evaluation is often expressed in monetary terms, for everything has a value. Not only items in shops have values assigned to them, but the worth of people is likewise measured. Is the CEO of Telecom really worth $1,000,000 every year? The fact that we even understand the question shows how deep is the instinct to compete and evaluate.

The result is that, in such a culture, we are tempted to try to *earn* God's blessing. Of course, this desire to earn God's favor is not unique to the West. It was present in ancient Israel and led to a religion of law-keeping; it is present in every human culture and so in every human

[2]An evangelistic course that explains what Christianity is about and invites participants to explore the faith. It began in the UK at an Evangelical Anglican church, but is used by churches all over the world and has resulted in many conversions.

religion. As a result, it creeps into the church. We substitute cheap grace that we can earn for the incalculably costly grace (bought by the death of Jesus) that God offers freely. Maybe as we learn to picture God as mother, we will learn that grace is not cheap. . .it is free!

Public as Well as Private

Our concern in this series of lectures has been our personal relationship with God. However, although seminaries may teach that God is not male, if our public worship language is expressed in male forms and presents only male images of God, it becomes more difficult for us to experience the full richness of God. Therefore, one of my concerns is that feminine language and pictures should also be found in our public worship. (Here I have only been focusing on motherly language and pictures, but there are other feminine images in both the Scriptures and the history of Christian thought and worship.)

At this point, we need to engage our minds as well as our spirits. For most of us, picturing God as father works really well. Likely one reason is that we have learned to imagine Father God in ways that take up some of the richness of Jesus' own talk of Father God.[3] There are other people, both those with bad experiences of fathers and those who have not been taught what Father God is like, for whom father language and pictures alone do not communicate this full depth. If all of our public God-language is cast in terms of "Father" and "Lord," then we risk people imagining God as a teacher grading our quality or a policeman checking our obedience to laws. So it is important that we find ways to enrich and deepen our expression of what God is like in public worship as well. Merely trying (where possible) to avoid sexist language is not enough. Many churches do that but this risks sounding either unisex or impersonal. Yet the truth of God is deeply and richly personal. Since readers of these lectures are present or future leaders in churches, if *we* do not find ways to broaden our worship language, no one else will.

Public worship both follows and shapes personal devotion. It is unclear which is cause and which is effect, since both are cause and effect, as the English question: "Which came first: the chicken or the egg?" suggests. For this reason also, it is important that the two do not get out of step with each other. Therefore, let's not only explore ways

[3]See the lecture: "God as Father in the New Testament."

to enrich and deepen our private devotion using motherly pictures of God, but also (after thought and prayer) find ways to incorporate this into public worship. For if relating to God as mother can deepen and broaden our experience of God, we should share this richer understanding with others.

For those like Baptists and Pentecostals whose worship style is largely about music and singing, it would be very helpful if there were a wider variety of pictures of God in our worship songs. I believe that currently many (or even most) of the people in our churches think of God as male.[4] Such a limited god cannot really be the God of the Bible. Although their understanding of God is not totally wrong, it should be closer to the reality of the biblical God.

Theologians and pastors are taking a cop-out on this issue. We know, write, and teach that God is not gendered, that God is beyond gender, indeed beyond everything we can imagine and think. However, our worship language does not reflect this truth…and it should! For theology that is not lived is dead and we worship the living God.

Conclusion

I hope in this series of lectures that we have begun to realize that God is richer and deeper than our language can express because human languages are simply incapable of expressing the full riches of God. I hope further that I have convinced all of us that adding "mother"—not so much the word as the idea—to our stock of word pictures we use is one way that we can enrich our experience of God. I conclude with the following double question: How can we experience this more for ourselves, and how can we encourage it for others?

[4]I have not researched this but many experiences suggest that it is true.