

A Mother's Comfort

Isaiah 66:13 13 As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

It's Mother's Day, and so it is no surprise that the media has released a number of versions of "Best TV Moms." Thus, if you Google that phrase, you'll find lists of the best 10, best 15, best 20 and even best 50 TV moms of all time.

These lists include the likes of Clair Huxtable from "The Cosby Show," Carol Brady from "The Brady Bunch," Lorelai Gilmore from "Gilmore Girls," Marge Simpson from "The Simpsons," Elyse Keaton from "Family Ties," Lynette Scavo from "Desperate Housewives," Ruth Fisher from "Six Feet Under," Marion Cunningham from "Happy Days" and others.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these lists also prompted one site to produce a roll of the 10 worst TV moms. It's populated by mothers like the Dowager Countess from "Downton Abbey," Colleen Donaghy from "30 Rock," Claire Matthews from "The Following," Lois from "Malcolm in the Middle" and other charmers. Here's how that list presents Lucille Bluth from "Arrested Development":

"Jessica Walter's Lucille Bluth is just ... perfect. Scarily perfect. Michael Bluth may be 'the one son who had no choice but to keep his family together,' but Lucille arguably is the one who actually does it: with scare tactics, guilt-tripping and a bucket of lies. And, oh yeah, she adopted a Korean child to make her youngest child jealous. Then lost him in the walls.

"We admire her ability to function despite her rampant alcoholism, her witty putdowns, her style -- but we're mostly just impressed at the lengths this woman will go to force her children to love her. Or at least pretend to."

One way to decide which list on which these TV mothers belong -- best mom or worst mom -- might be to answer two questions: *If you were hurting emotionally, to which of these mothers would you go for comfort? To which of these mothers would you not go for comfort?*

If you stopped 100 people on the street and asked them to describe God or what God looks like, many would use the word "father." They may even describe the stereotypical vision of God as an old man with a beard. Our language in Scripture encourages this outlook by usually referring to God as "He." But Scripture, in fact, has a number of passages which appeal to God with decidedly feminine imagery. [NOTE 1]

In Isaiah 66, there's a striking verse where God, using maternal imagery, speaks to the generation of Israelites who have returned from the Babylonian exile to the ruins of Jerusalem. God says that the God of Israel is like a mother one can turn to: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (v. 13).

There are some who argue for a theology that includes not only a heavenly Father, but also a heavenly Mother. While there's little in the Bible to support that kind of

separation of God into genders, you can't deny that it has a certain appeal. One writer, Taylor Rouanzion, has expressed this appeal in a poem, part of which reads:

*I cry out without sound to Him I've been told is there,
But my soul yearns for something more.*

*He knows my pain, yes,
But so does She. And A mother's pain
Needs a Mother's comfort.*

We don't need a God separated that way, because, fortunately, the Bible, in this verse from Isaiah 66 and others, recognizes that in God, the paternal and the maternal are both present.

This is perhaps emphasized in one of the names used for God in the Old Testament, *El Shaddai*, which first appears in Genesis 17:1, where God tells Abram and Sarai that they are to have a son. English Bibles usually translate *El Shaddai* as "God Almighty," but scholars say that's just a guess at its meaning. The *El* part of the name is the shortened form of *Elohim* and it means "God," but *Shaddai* is possibly derived from the Hebrew word *shad*, which is invariably used in Scripture for a woman's breast, the place where a child is cuddled and nursed, and thus the name may be a nod to the maternal side of God's nature.

There is also Deuteronomy 32:18, where Moses chides the disobedient Israelites, saying, "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." The prophet Isaiah quotes God saying, "For a long time I have held my peace, I have kept still and restrained myself; now I will cry out like a woman in labor, I will gasp and pant." (Isaiah 42:14) and "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands." (Isaiah 49:14-16). In the Gospel of Matthew we read, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Matthew 23:37). And in the Psalms, "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he show us His mercy." (Psalm 123:2). **[NOTE 2]**

What's more, God's comfort is a strong theme in the Bible. Portions of two prophetic books -- Isaiah chapters 40-55 and Jeremiah chapters 30-31 -- are often described as "books of comfort," but the theme of God as comforter isn't limited to those texts. We hear it in many of the psalms, including Psalm 23: "Your rod and your staff -- they comfort me." In the New Testament, Paul speaks of God as "the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who consoles us in all our affliction ..." (2 Corinthians 1:3-4). And Revelation speaks of a final consolation for the people of God: "[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

Our English word "comfort" comes from the Latin *confortare*, which means "to strengthen." The "fort" hidden within it is also found within our words "fortitude" and "fortify." Often we imagine the act of comforting to be little more than soothing hurt feelings, stroking another's head and saying, "There, there." A mother comforting a child may do exactly that, but that's not all she's doing. Comfort done well, is more than just administering a dose of emotional anesthetic. Comfort strengthens its recipients so they may face the same -- and worse -- challenges next time.

The imagery here in Isaiah 66 communicates especially well: God comforts like a good mother comforts her child. Now, we know that fathers can also provide comfort -- and children need the tender love of a father every bit as much as a mother's. But we also know that when push comes to shove, when a knee is scraped or a hope dashed, children often will run first to their mother, sometimes holding back tears until they are in those arms.

Having said that, we should note that in the Isaiah 66 verse 13, God was speaking and promising comfort to *grown-ups*. The hurts of childhood are fleeting, and often a hug and a few tender words are sufficient to supply the comfort needed. But the hurts of adulthood -- the pain of loss, worry, illness, the realities of the human condition -- are another matter. And for those, we might long for comfort and help as effective as that which we found from our mothers in our early years. This is why all mothers know that comforting a child doesn't end when they go off to high school or college or even when they marry and have children of their own. When I am hurting, I still want to talk to my Mom. In many greeting cards, we compare moms to superheroes. In the cold and flu commercials, we say that "Moms don't take sick days," because it is a well-known fact that moms just don't stop. Between making lunches, carpools, going to work, science fair projects and so much more, moms don't have time for a sick day. So they work through their cold, headache, fatigue and everything else that gets them down. Without their diligence and superhuman behavior, everyone else in the household wouldn't function as easily.

To all of you who are Moms, you are a superhero. No one can take that away from you. You made a life and grew it inside of you. That is a miracle. You raised that life and continue to help it grow every day. You are a superhero. *But it's okay to acknowledge your kryptonite. Yes, your organization, parenting and carpool capabilities are superb but your kids know that you are only human and they do not expect that you **have it all together all the time**.* [Emphasis added]

Spiderman wept when Uncle Henry died because despite his Spidey capabilities he felt human emotions, he felt grief. Superman fell in love with Lois Lane and at one point he gave up his powers to be with her. He felt love, a very human emotion, and he let it impact his superhero duties. [Did] the citizens of Metropolis or Forest Hills ever blame either of these two heroes for what they felt? No. Yes, they are superheroes but they have their flaws and their own problems, emotions and feelings that they need to attend to in order to save their cities.

You can't save the city until you save yourself. You are going to make mistakes.

You have made mistakes, but no one blames you for them. Sometimes there is no right way of doing things or a right thing to do. Perfect is unachievable even for the superhuman. So if you ever feel like you need forgiveness for running a couple of minutes late in the carpool, accidentally putting peanuts in your kid's lunch despite one child's allergy, forgetting to sign the permission slip, burning the cupcakes for the bake sale, you have it. ... If you want forgiveness, you have it. I'm telling you that you don't need it though. Don't apologize for not having all the answers. No one gave them to you. Don't apologize for being imperfect. No one expects you to be. Recognize that you are human. To all of the moms, you are superheroes, but at the end of the day, Kryptonite could still kill Clark Kent. --Sarah Howell, "To the mothers who aren't perfect: Moms are superhuman but every hero has their weakness and no one blames them for that," May 30, 2017. theodysseyonline.com. Retrieved December 7, 2017. **[NOTE 3]**

But how exactly does God comfort us? *For one, God comforts us through the presence, care and verbal encouragement of other Christians.* While there are some Christians who are especially good at that -- who have good listening skills and sensitivity -- encouragement is something all of us can do. One definition of comfort is "to stand alongside to lend support and encouragement when the situation cannot be changed." This is something most of us can do for others. And such "standing alongside" often helps those dealing with that which cannot be changed to cope with the situation as it is.

But, *for two, God sometimes comforts us more directly.* The psalmist said, "When my anxieties multiply, your comforting calms me down" (94:19, CEB). Interestingly, that verse is from Psalm 94, which bemoans the injustice of life and the arrogance of evildoers who seem to get away with their deeds. But the psalmist finds comfort in the confidence that God reigns and will deal with the inequities and miscreants in God's own time. This is why the writer can say: *Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, "My foot is slipping," your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up.* (94:16-18).

How God delivers comfort will vary, but it sometimes comes while we are in prayer. It is sometimes transmitted through a verse or passage that jumps out at us while reading the Bible. Or it might come over us as inner assurance in the midst of grief or trouble.

Many of us can remember our mother's comfort. On this day, some of us still have mothers we can call or mothers to whom we can send a card or bouquet of flowers. We are grateful for our mothers. We are thankful for their enduring and unconditional love. We are glad that when we were children we had mothers to whom we could run for comfort. For some of us the unconditional love of our mother was the first example we had of God's love.

When she was in trouble, she thought about God and her mother. Jessica Buchanan went to Somalia to be an educator, working through the Danish Refugee Council. She never imagined she would experience what she did in 2012.

Buchanan and another aid worker were kidnapped by Somali pirates and held

captive for over 90 days. She feared for her life but her kidnappers never thought to kill her. They wanted her alive so that they could demand and receive a ransom for her release. In the three months of captivity, she was moved every day, not given much food (lost 25 pounds) and developed a serious urinary tract infection.

One night as she looked into the Somali sky she focused on a star that represented for her the presence of her mother who had died the year before. She asked her mother and God to send help. For all she knew very few people were aware her situation or condition. But her situation was known all the way to the president of the U.S. and higher because her prayer was answered. That night the elite Navy Seal Team 6 raided the camp and rescued her and her colleague. Imagine what it must have sounded like to hear that Navy Seal tell her, "Jessica, we're with the American military and we are here to take you home. You are safe." --"The rescue of Jessica Buchanan," cbsnews.com. Retrieved December 16, 2017.

Many of us knew the unconditional love of a good Mom. But there are some who did not have such a mother, who lost a mother while young in life or whose experience does not align with God's description of a mother who comforts a child. This is something you would not wish on any child. You don't want children to have a sense of loss. So, even the absence of such a comforting presence reinforces in a way the reality of it and of its power.

Intuitively, whatever our experience, we understand the concept of a mother's comfort. God uses this metaphor to help us understand how God relates to us. And so on Mother's Day, we can be thankful for our earthly mothers, and we are grateful to God for the comfort offered us if today we feel a sense of loss, or if our hearts are swelling with love. God's word to us doesn't leave too much room for misunderstanding. God says, "I will comfort you." Period. God does not stutter! If you are hurting, He will comfort you! But some people interpret that to mean, He heals you or takes the problem away? Comfort does NOT equal healing unfortunately. So God said it, I believe it. **[NOTE 4]**

What should be our response? Let's allow God to encircle us with the arms of love and mercy. Let's feel the comforting presence of the Almighty. In Rembrandt's painting titled "The Return of the Prodigal Son" you see a Father embracing his son who is kneeling on the floor. But if you look at the hands of the father one is coarser, thicker, while the other is more slender and delicate. In Henri Nouwen's Book "A Meditation of Fathers, Brothers and Sons" he writes that the two different hands represents the masculine and feminine sides of God welcoming the son home, cradling Him in His arms. So we should give thanks for a God who with all the love of a mother and father comforts us, encourages us and always welcomes us home! Let's submit to the gentle touch and embrace of God as we are led through the rough patches of life. Remember that Psalm 23 reads, "Yea though I walk THROUGH the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil." He always gets us through the valley! Let's relax and stop resisting God's firm and persistent efforts to draw us into the comfort of His peace, his mercy, and His presence. Let's Pray ...Amen.

Sermon Notes for “A Mother’s Comfort” based on Isaiah 66:13

Given at Doster Community Church on Mother’s Day May 11, 2025

- I. “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13). In God, both the paternal and maternal are both present. Despite all the references to God as “He”, God is both. God is infinite we are finite.
- II. God’s comfort is a strong theme in the Bible! Isaiah chapters 40-55 and Jeremiah chapters 30 & 31 are “books of comfort.” The theme of comforter can be found all over the Bible.
- III. God comforts us through the presence, care and verbal encouragement of other Christians. But He also comforts us more directly. Sometimes God’s comfort comes while we pray, sometimes through a verse of Scripture, sometimes by a peace through the Holy Spirit.
- IV. God said it, believe it! What should our response be? Like the invitation to let Jesus come into your heart. “Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). We need to receive His comfort!

What are you going to do about it? Think about and write down how you might better receive God’s comfort during this next week and always?

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