



THE NATURE OF NURTURE

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According to national retail statistics, Americans will spend approximately \$14 billion on their mothers today. It's the number one day for eating out. The biggest day of the year for phone calls. Hallmark will sell 141 million cards, and the flower industry will do 25% of its business for the entire year. Kind of impressive numbers. But the mother of Mother's Day would not be pleased in the least.

Anna Jarvis was the woman who came up with the holiday back in the early 1900s. She lobbied and convinced President Woodrow Wilson to make it a national holiday.

But once it was adopted, Anna Jarvis was appalled at how commercial Mother's Day became. She spent the rest of her life trying to stop the spending frenzy. She was against the selling of flowers for it. And greeting cards drove her crazy. She said,

A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world. And candy! You take a box to Mother — and then eat most of it yourself.

Maybe if somebody sent her a box of chocolates she'd quit being so crabby. I'm not sure why it bothered her so much, but she had a very clear idea in her head of what Mother's Day was supposed to be about. She said:

This day is intended that we may make new resolutions for a more active thought to our dear mothers. By words, gifts, acts of affection, and in every way possible, give her pleasure, and make her heart glad every day... tell her of a few of her noble good qualities and how you love her.

In other words, the day was created to celebrate and think about moms. We have the creator of the holiday's direct words on the subject: She wanted us to celebrate and think about moms. Although I personally think cards, chocolates and flowers are lovely ways to do that. And moms – enjoy your entire New Day truffle without sharing it.

But if we're going to ask why someone created Mother's Day, maybe we should also ask why someone created moms. Obviously it was a brilliant concept and we're all grateful that so many of them are so good at it. But what was the original intent in God's mind

when he made Eve, the first mother? We have God's own words on the subject in the beginning of Genesis:

Genesis 1:27

*God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female.*

Men and women were created to reflect God's nature. And since men and women are different, I believe they each highlight different aspects of God's nature. And just like Mother's Day gives us a chance to celebrate and think about moms, moms give us a chance to celebrate and think about God. There are ways that moms are like God, and he intended for them to be a picture of his character for us.

The Bible refers to God as our Father, and so we normally think of him in masculine terms. But God is spirit – he doesn't have gender in the way we do. Both male and female are created in his image. And while he's never called our mother, there are verses in Scripture where he compares himself to a mother, a mother hen and a mother bear, because those comparisons do a better job of capturing certain aspects of who he is.

I think the most fitting way to truly honor moms on Mother's Day is to explore what it is about them that points us Godward. Because there is no higher privilege than bearing the image of God, and that is part of what moms were created to do.

If there is one overarching word associated with motherhood, I think it would be **nurture**. Now I realize I'm profiling here – not all moms are great nurturers, and some dads are equally good at it. But by and large, if you asked most people what qualities they thought an ideal mom should have, nurturing would be at the top of the list. Because it is the word that is so tightly linked to mothers, that's the word I want to key in on as being their mirror of God. Is God nurturing? And if so, is he like mothers?

To nurture is *to cultivate a space where someone can grow and flourish*. It's like when you bring a new tree home from the nursery and you plant it in your yard. You dig a really big hole, and you surround the tree with fresh topsoil, fertilizer and mulch. You put a stake next to it to help it grow straight, and you water it thoroughly on a regular basis. That's what nurture is like – creating an environment where health and growth are possible.

Moms have lots of ways that they do that, but I would like to just look at **three main ways they provide nurture**. On a most basic level, one thing moms everywhere seem concerned about is **Feeding**.

I have to admit I occasionally took advantage of my mother in this area. I remember one time when I was in high school, we were sitting together as a family down in the family room, watching TV. Out of the blue I said, "Sure that would be great." My mom said,

“What?” And I said, “Oh – I’m sorry – I thought you asked me if I wanted you to make me a sandwich.” Isn’t that awful? The sad thing is, she actually got up and did it! That maternal feeding instinct runs deep.

I want to share a story with you from the Jerusalem Post about a mother named Susie Weiss and her son who was in the army. Here’s what it said:

Every Jewish mother worries whether her son has enough to eat, especially when he's serving in the army. This is the story about one such Jewish mother who did something about it. The soldier is Ari Weiss, 21. He's a good soldier, and a good son, who calls his mom every week and certainly before and after every holiday.

So when he called his mother, Susie, after Rosh Hashana to relate his holiday experience, he told of his 25-hour stakeout the first night and day, and the second day spent praying and sleeping.

"He said he could only take with him for the stakeout what he could put in his pocket," said Susie. "He said everything worked out well, but all I kept hearing is 'we're starving, we're starving.'"

She asked what she could do, but her son said there was nothing to do. "I had one more question: How many are you? He said 35, and with that I hung up."

Off she went walking down the main drag in Ra'anana, wondering what to do. Suddenly she came upon Kippa Aduma, the schwarma (sandwich wrap) hangout she knows Ari loves.

"I went to the manager of the store, and said, 'My son is in Nablus. He's stuck in some hellhole with no fridge, and he's hungry.'

He interrupted my sentence and asked the same question I did: 'How many are there?' I told him 35, and he said, 'What time do you need it?' " After arranging for the pickup, Weiss walked down the street, satisfied she has done her motherly duty. Wandering into a wholesale grocery, she thought, Why not?

"I gave him the shpeil, and he said, 'What do you want from me?' I looked around and I saw candies and chocolate, but I thought they would melt. Then I saw a case of drinks. He said, 'How many do you need?' I said two, and he gave me 80 drinks."

Feeling empowered, Weiss continued down the street and walked into Balkan Bakery. "I started giving the shpeil, and he, too, interrupted me and said, 'We close at 8, be here at 7:30 and I'll give you everything I have left.'"

Weiss ambled farther down the street and into Meatland, a frozen meat and condiments grocery store. "I gave the same shpeil. I said how about some cookies, and he said, 'OK, three cases.' I said they don't need so much, and he said, 'Each soldier needs his own.'"

Susie kept going, collecting from a bakery here, friends there until she had a massive care package. Then she coordinated with the army for how to deliver it all to the unit that night. She says,

"An hour later I got a phone call from Ari, with peals of laughter and screaming in the background. Not only was he king of the day, but I have 34 new boyfriends," she laughed. "Soldiers were grabbing the phone saying, 'Mrs. Weiss, you have no idea what you have done for us.'"

For Susie, it was all about being a Jewish mother. "My goal was for them to have enough to last through Yom Kippur," she said. Mission accomplished.

I love that story, because it's the epitome of motherly feeding concern in action. As soon as she sensed her son was hungry, she was not going to let anything stop her from meeting the need. And she didn't just do a little – she went all out, sending enough to feed an army, literally.

Moms have radar for the cry, "I'm hungry." And God is the same way.

2 Chronicles 16:9

For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him.

He is scanning all the time, looking for who is crying out to him. When we tell him we're running on empty, when we tell him we are needy, those prayers never fall on deaf ears. Sometimes we may feel like he has forgotten us, because we aren't seeing answers. But he hasn't, and he even appeals to the nature of mothers to help us believe that.

Isaiah 49:15-16

Can a mother forget her nursing child? Can she feel no love for a child she has borne? But even if that were possible, I would not forget you!

God always hears us. And like a mother, God feeds his children:

Psalms 107:9

For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

Maybe you feel God isn't listening right now. You're still waiting to be filled up, and you're wondering whether or not God has really heard you at all. All I can do is point to the cross. I'm not trying to just give a pat, "Jesus is the answer" response, but God sacrificed everything right there to satisfy our hunger for life and purpose and joy and love and connection. The depth of his love and concern for our needs is as real as it can be. And when we go to Christ with our desperation, we will be fed.

Philippians 4:19

And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus

I think about that soldier who was hungry, but didn't think his mom could do much, so he didn't ask. It wasn't only his request that drove her – it was her nature that kicked in. She took the feeding seriously because she was a mother. Sometimes we are equally skeptical that God can do anything for our situation, but it is in his nature to care about feeding his children well, and he is motivated to meet our needs as much by his own character as our requests. We can count on his nurture to want to fill us up.

A second component of a mother's nurturing style is **comfort**. Let's face it: whose comfort did you want as a child? Dad would do in a pinch, but moms have the touch that you crave in those moments. As Princess Di once said, "A mother's arms are more comforting than anyone else's."

So it is no wonder that God would see moms as the best analogy for his own compassion.

Isaiah 66:13

As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.

So what does a mother's comfort look like? Imagine you're six years old. You've just learned to ride a two-wheeler and you're out for a ride, thoroughly intoxicated with the rush of newfound freedom. Then all of a sudden you hit a rock, lose your balance and land on your knee on the asphalt and get a scrape.

You run crying into the house, half from pain, half from the trauma of the event. And there's your mom. She rushes over to hear what happened, and you can see the look on her face begin to match her own as she takes on your pain as if it happened to her. Then she begins to soothe you with her voice, talking about how awful it must have been and how everything is going to be okay. It's not a bad scrape. Then of course she cleans it off, kisses it and covers it with a band-aid. Then it's a hug and a pat and you're good to go.

What exactly did mom do? She showed empathy, feeling your sadness with you. She gave you calmness – alleviating your fears and assuring you it will be okay. And she offered healing – nothing eases pain like a kiss and a band-aid.

Those are things we can look for in God's comfort of us. He feels deeply with us, he speaks peace to our souls and he is full of healing. I love the verse in Revelation that says God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. What a gentle image of the God whose comfort is like a mother with her child.

A third element of a mother's nurture is **protection**. Here again, dads also have this trait, but there is something uniquely passionate and intense about the way mothers of every species will defend their babies. They will stand up for them with a ferocity that defies reason, taking on enemies that you would think would have the upper hand.

In 2006, a mom named Nabila Nazli was in her second story apartment in Brooklyn when a raging fire broke out. The stairwell was inaccessible, so Nabila started screaming out the window, holding her month-old son. Some neighbors brought out a quilt, so Nabila released her son who dropped 20 feet and was caught unharmed on the blanket.

She went back into the room and brought out her baby's twin brother, and did the same thing with him. Then she went back for another. And then her fourth child, making sure each one of them got out.

But her fifth child, a five year old girl, was too afraid to jump. She would not do it. Neighbors pleaded with Nabila to just get herself out of the building, but she refused to leave her daughter behind. So she stayed there, in the room, holding her in the fire. When firefighters arrived and reached the room, they were both unconscious from smoke inhalation, but still alive, laying right next to each other on the floor.

Her husband, who had been at work at the time, said of her, "Every mother has the same nature. They save their babies first. They don't care about their lives."

God is in the business of rescuing and protecting his children. Sometimes he does that by grabbing us out of the fire, and sometimes he does it by staying right with us through the fire.

Isaiah 43:1-3

*"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.*

You might be in one of those fires right now. As intense as the heat feels and as much as you may wish you didn't have to go through it, you can know this: God will not abandon you. He has already shown us through Jesus that he is willing to enter our pain, to make the most costly sacrifices to shield us. He will be right beside you until it's over.

Feeding, comforting, protecting – the nature of a mother's nurture and the nature of God's nurture. For some of you this morning, it's hard to relate to that. Because your mom didn't give you a great picture of those qualities of God. What do you do then? That was the case for Sherry Haake. I've asked her to come and share her story with us this morning of how, in the absence of that clear picture, God stepped in and parented her in miraculous ways.

SHERRY HAAKE

Human moms are just that – human. Some give us a great picture of nurture, others not so much. Either way, God is the greater reality beyond the picture. He can nurture you in ways a mother can only hint at. The cry of your heart reaches his, and he is ready to respond in compassion. Ole Hallesby put it well:

Your infant child cannot formulate in words a single petition to you. Yet the little ones pray in the best way they know how. All they can do is cry, but you understand very well their pleading.

He who is the Father of all that is called mother and all that is called child in heaven and on earth deals with us in the same way.

What form of nurture are you crying out for God to give you? Feeding? Comfort? Protection? It is his heart's desire to create a space for you to grow and flourish. He proved it through Jesus. And he's ready to meet you in your need today.