# The Role of the Mother

**Psalm 131;Psalm 91:1-4;Isaiah 49:14-15; Isaiah 66:13**

Pastor Bryan Clark

We are taking a couple of weeks here to talk about parenting. Last week we talked about the role of the father; this week, the role of the mother, but each of us, even if we aren't currently in a parenting season, still need to think about how you yourself were parented and recognize that that has dramatically affected your view of God. Whether you understand that or not, how you were parented dramatically affects your view of God and there's nothing more important in your Christian walk than your view of God. So, both, we can apply this to all of us in terms of how we were parented and to those who are still parenting, hopefully you'll find this helpful.

Just a couple of preliminary comments: I would say Mother's Day is always a challenge for us as a church. There's always this tension—because we certainly want to honor mothers in a culture that no longer really values motherhood, but we also realize, for some women, Mother's Day is a very painful day. It's a reminder of the longing you have in your heart to be a mom, and that hasn't happened for you yet. So I guess we are just saying we know that you are there. We know for some of you, this is a very hard day. And our prayer would be that you would simply experience God's delight in you today on this Mother's Day.

I also understand that what we are talking about is the ideal. It's the way it's supposed to be. It's possible to walk away saying, "You know, that's fine. That's kind of the ideal, but a lot of us don't live in the ideal." I understand that. This is kind of the goal. This is the way it *should* be— and there's the realization that that's not always the way it is. Also, just to note, there're some of you that are single parents—and I understand that's a tremendous challenge. My heart goes out to you. It's hard enough as a two-parent family in a complicated culture. For those of you that are single parents, we just want you to know that we want to do everything we can to help. When we talk about the role of the father and the role of the mother, it's important to understand, I think, as a single parent, you can't be both. That's a myth. So you need to decide: if you are a father, you need to understand what your role as a father is, and be the best father you can be. If you are a mother, what your role as a mother is, and be the best mother you can be. And also understand then what's missing, and get a little bit creative in how you help fill that in—and I think God helps fill that in, in a very unique way.

So having said all of that, just a couple of more introductory comments, and then we'll get into the role of the mother. I think it's important to remind ourselves—and you saw it in the statements that the parents were committing to earlier—to be an effective parent and an effective Christian parent, you yourself must be growing spiritually. Now I realize that's rather obvious. You say, "Well, that comes right out of the 'duh' file." I understand that. But I would suggest to you often that's not the case. Think of it this way: It is a challenge under the best of conditions to discipline yourself to do what you need to do to grow spiritually. When you add the complications of children and their needs and their schedules and their activities and everything that goes with that, it takes far more discipline and commitment and intentionality to continue growing yourself through that complicated season of raising children. I would suggest to you, many parents actually go backwards not forward in this season. So that's my challenge to you. It's a difficult thing to keep growing as a Christian in this parenting season—but your kids need that.

I would also suggest to you that, to be an effective parent, you must cultivate a healthy marriage. I'm surprised how many parents think, even though our marriage is dysfunctional, I can be a really good parent. I think you are kidding yourself if you think that. The number one thing that parents can do to be effective parents is: husbands and wives love one another and create the secure healthy bond at home. That's really, really important. And lastly, it's to understand the biblical role of a mother and the biblical role of a father, and that's what we are talking about.

So with that in mind, I would tell you that years ago, when I was trying to sort this out for ourselves—and Patti and I actually tried to live out these rules for years before I ever offered it up in a sermon—in the process of my study, I found that when God wanted to reveal the disciplining, coaching, instructing side of His character, He consistently used the imagery of a father. That's what we talked about last week. I also found a very consistent pattern, that when God wants to reveal that nurturing, compassionate, place of refuge side of His character, He consistently uses the imagery of a mother. So I would suggest to you that I think the biblical role of a mother is to be the primary nurturer, to create this imagery at home that God is a place of safety, God's a place of refuge; God is that compassionate, nurturing, caring mother. So with that in mind, I just want to show you a couple of passages. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 131. Psalm 131 is one of my favorite psalms because I love the imagery. It's a psalm of David, one of the Psalms of Ascent. Verse 1:

> **O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty;**
> **Nor do I involve myself in great matters,**
> **Or in things too difficult for me.**
> **Surely I have composed and quieted my soul;**
> **Like a weaned child rests against his mother,**
> **My soul is like a weaned child within me.**
> **O Israel, hope in the LORD**
> **From this time forth and forever.** (*NASB, Psalm 131)

David, in verse 1, is saying that this world is filled with things I can't control. It's filled with things that are overwhelming. If you are prone to fear and worry, I would suggest to you there's plenty to worry about. There's plenty to be fearful over. Most of what happens in the world, we can't control—and there's a reality to the fact that life is filled with storms. So what do you do? Do you spend your life in anxiety and fear and worry about one storm after another? What David is saying is: I don't spend time dwelling on this. I can't fix it; I can't change it—and I don't want to live that way." So he's found a solution. He's found a place of refuge, and he uses the imagery of a mother. He says, "I crawl into God's lap and there I find safety. There I find a place of refuge. There I find a place that quiets my soul, and I have this sense in the midst of the storm, everything is going to be okay."

The idea of **a weaned child** is to emphasize this is not a child that's crawling into his or her mother's lap because he or she is hungry. It's because there's the storm, and this child is looking for a place of refuge; this child is looking for a place of safety. Maybe I could plant a seed in your mind this morning, every time you see that scene play out—where you see something happening and a child fleeing to his or her mom to find a place of refuge. It's interesting on a spring or summer night, when there's a storm raging outside, a child alone in bed often gets fearful. But as soon as that child finds mom and crawls into bed with mom, or crawls onto mom's lap, there's a sense in which everything's going to be okay. The lightning is still flashing, the thunder still

crashing—and frankly, mom can't do anything to change that—but the child feels like this is a place of refuge; this is a place of safety. When I'm here, everything's going to be okay.

Now this is one of my favorite images because it's a deeply meaningful image to me. As a pastor, we tend to take on a lot of people's pain and stuff—and sometimes it gets rather overwhelming. What I found out about myself is: I can actually take on a lot of stuff if I have a place to go, if I have a place of refuge, if I have a place of safety, if I have a place that can quiet my soul, where I have the sense that everything's going to be okay. Think about a child. A child can take on the world if that child knows there's always a place of safety; there's always a place of refuge; there's a place I can go where it's going to be okay.

What happens if home isn't that place of safety? What happens when home isn't that place of refuge? What happens if the storm is actually at home? Where does that child go to find safety and refuge? Typically that child will find it somewhere else—and that somewhere else is almost always bad. So it's a very important concept: a mother has this high and holy calling of creating this place of safety, this place of refuge that, in the midst of the storms, there's one place where everything is going to be okay.

Turn back to Psalm 91. This is another psalm that refers to this imagery but doesn't specifically refer to a mother. Psalm 91, verse 1:

> **He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High**
> **Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty.**
> **I will say to the LORD, "My refuge and my fortress,**
> **My God, in whom I trust!"**
> **For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper**
> **And from the deadly pestilence.**
> **He will cover you with His pinions,**
> **And under His wings you may seek refuge;**
> **His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.** (Vs. 1-4)

It's a very common imagery throughout the Scriptures, especially in the psalms, and that is the imagery of God as a place of refuge. In this case it's talking about a bird, probably an eagle and an eagle's nest. The little birds are in that nest and are covered with the wings of the mother bird as a place of safety, a place of protection. So here's my question to you: When you read something like this in Psalm 91, is there something that resonates in your soul that says, "That's true of God. I have found God to be my place of refuge. He's my place of safety. He's the place I go to quiet my soul in the midst of the storm." If some of you are to be honest, you would say everyday is filled with fear; it's filled with anxiety; it's filled with a restlessness in your soul. And if you are to be honest, you'd say, "I don't find God to be my place of refuge; it's not a place of quietness; I can't get my soul quieted." If that's the case, I would ask you the question: Why is that? And is it possible because, for you, home was not a place of safety, it was not a place of refuge, that you did not experience that with your mother growing up? Therefore, it's hard for you to understand how God is that for you. Like we talked about last week, you have to start separating out what happened at home from who God is, that just because your home wasn't a place of refuge doesn't mean God can't be a place of refuge for you. So this is the imagery; this is the assignment that a mother has.

Now one of the things that I would maybe encourage you to be very thoughtful about, if you are raising children, one thing I've noticed is parents and mothers tend to be very good at this when the

child is very young. But they tend to be less effective at this as the child moves into adolescence. It tends to be more about conflict, more about tension—and it becomes less about safety and refuge. And I think that's highly unfortunate. Probably this is the time in the life of that child when that child most needs a place of refuge, a place of safety, somewhere to go. It's very hard to be a teenager in today's world. It's very complicated, and it's filled with landmines and pressures and stresses and storms and peer pressure. These young adolescents need some place to go where it feels safe. Everything's going to be okay—that you can handle it out there—because everything is okay in here. So it's important to be thoughtful about being really strategic in that season of a child's life.

Now let me just throw something out as food for thought. Some of you mothers, maybe some of you parents, are going to be horrified at what I'm about to say, but I'm just throwing it out for food for thought. One of the areas where I think parents tend to get very intense is about their child's bedroom. I know we are well intended; we want that child to be responsible; we want that child to take responsibility, and we want to clean up that room. That's part of what it means to grow up and mature and be an adult. Okay, I get all that. But let me invite you to think about it a little differently. Have you ever thought about what's happening in that bedroom is something more than that, that there maybe is something more going on? Have you ever thought about all of the stress, all of the pressure, all of the performance anxiety that a teenager faces? Every place in that adolescent's life—it's pressure. It's pressure to perform in school; it's pressure in athletics; it's pressure from peers; it's pressure in music; it's pressure in academics; it's pressure...it's pressure everywhere! And pretty soon that adolescent feels like every area of life is filled with this pressure that never goes away. Is it possible that that adolescent is simply looking for one place in life that isn't like that? And isn't there one place in life where I can be a slob and I can just let it go? Can I just take a deep breath because this is my place of refuge, and there's one place in my life where I don't feel like I have to perform? Isn't it possible there's a whole lot more going on there? And what happens when you take that away and it becomes one more place where there's pressure? Is it possible that that adolescent will seek refuge somewhere else? And, trust me; you don't want it somewhere else. Food for thought...

A couple of other passages that refer to this idea of God capturing this imagery of a mother: one is in Isaiah, Chapter 49. The background of Isaiah 49 is the Hebrew people—referred to as Zion in this text—they've been disobedient; they have rebelled against God and they are fearful that God's had it up to here. And God's going to say to them, "I don't want you to be my children anymore. I'm done with you." So Isaiah's responding to that in verse 14:

> **But Zion** *(which would be Israel)* **said, "The LORD has forsaken me,**
> **And the Lord has forgotten me."**

So they're saying, God's had it up to here. He's done with me. So Isaiah's going to respond:

> **"Can a woman forget her nursing child,**
> **And have no compassion on the son of her womb?**
> **Even these may forget, but I will not forget you."** (Vs. 15)

Basically Isaiah was seeking the most powerful human bond possible and is saying, "Is there a stronger bond than the bond between a mother and her child? Is it possible that that mother could ever forget and abandon that child?" But then he says, "Even if that happened, God's bond is

greater still." So God is saying that the imagery of the bond between a mother and a child is so powerful, but His bond with His children is more powerful still.
One interesting note, in 2 Timothy, Chapter 3, in the New Testament, Paul is writing to Timothy and he's talking about the things that will characterize the last days. And one of the things that he talks about is basically a loss of natural affection. In other words, what the Greek word is referring to is that bond that should be there between a mother and a child, or a parent and a child. One of the characteristics of the last days is that's going to decrease, and there won't be the natural bond. Parents will become so selfish and so determined to pursue their own things that they actually lose the natural bond that should define a mother and a child. And I think certainly we see that all too often in our culture today.

One more reference: Isaiah 66, in verse 13. Again, listen for the comparison between who God is and a mother:

> **"As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you;**
> **And you will be comforted in Jerusalem."**

There's no question of the imagery there, where God is saying, "If you've experienced that comfort, that nurturing, that place of safety in your own mother, God is saying, "That's Me. As you grow up, you have to transfer that to Me. I'll be your place of refuge. I'll be your place of safety. I'll be your place of comfort."

Now we could spend all day doing this because the Old Testament is filled with verses like that. It's a very consistent pattern, which would lead me to conclude that the biblical role of a mother is to be the primary nurturer. Now, as we talked about last week, it doesn't mean that the mother is the *only* nurturer, just like it means the father isn't the *only* disciplinarian, but it is in terms of having a primary role and understanding it that way. Certainly also, as children are really small, a lot of disciplining is just kind of managing the day to day, so they don't hurt themselves. But as they get older, more thoughtful, more willful, then these rules become far more critical.

I'm not saying that mothers love their children more than fathers. I would not say Patti loves our girls more than I do. But I would say she loves them differently—and it's part of the way that we are wired up. So here's the tension: A mother's role is to be the primary nurturer, to create this imagery that we've talked about. But, if the mother becomes the primary disciplinarian, what's lost in the mix is nurture—and that is a significant loss. Suddenly mom isn't safe anymore. Suddenly mom isn't a place of refuge. Suddenly everything's changing—and what's lost is this sense of safety and refuge that should define the relationship. What I hear from a lot of young mothers is, "I feel like all I ever do is get after my children." What you're feeling is that God has wired you to nurture. That's what you want to do; that's what you long to do and, frankly, that's what you are really good at. But you've taken the role of a disciplinarian, and that's getting in the way of your heart's longing to nurture. It is a myth that you can be both. You can't be both the mom and dad. You can't be both the primary nurturer and the primary disciplinarian. One squeezes the other out.

One of the things I understood early on, as Patti and I tried to wrestle through some of this stuff, is part of my assignment as a father, as a husband, is to protect Patti's capacity to nurture. And in order to do that, I have to intervene and take my role seriously. I found that even when it wasn't my conflict, even when it wasn't my issue, I got in the middle of it because I felt like part of my assignment was to resolve this, in order to protect Patti's ability to nurture—something which she's really good at. So I had to be disciplined to be very intentional about my role.

The other thing I realized is: no mother has an unlimited capacity to nurture. If you think of her nurturing like a gas tank, it's a tank that needs to be filled with love in order for something to flow out of that. Now if these biblical roles are correct, isn't it interesting that the biblical role of a husband is to love his wife the way Christ loved the church? In other words, if I'm fulfilling my biblical role as a husband, I'm filling her tank, which gives her what she needs to fulfill her role as a mother. She doesn't have unlimited capacity; I have to work really hard to love her as Christ loves the church—to keep her tank full so she can rightly nurture our children. So that's kind of how the assignments have to come together and work together.

Some of you mothers—right now I'm a mind reader; this is what you are thinking—you know, that sounds well and good, but I have to discipline because my husband doesn't do it. I get that...I get that. You see it everywhere you go. You see passive dads, oblivious to the fact that their kids are out of control, and poor moms trying to somehow manage the situation. You see it in stores; you see it in restaurants; you see it everywhere. So, okay, I get that. But…and before I make my following comment, I'm going to tell you this. Last week, after the message to the fathers, one of the mothers came to me and said, "I hope you don't pull any punches next week. Lay it on us like you did the dads." Okay...(laughter) I'm telling you right now, I am wandering into very dangerous waters. There are some of you mothers here this morning that would say, "I *have* to be the disciplinarian because my husband won't do it." I suggest to you to consider the possibility that the reason your husband doesn't do it is because you don't allow him to do it. You do not allow him to fulfill his biblical role. Mom runs the house; Mom runs the children; Mom runs the activities—and mom runs him! She's become a *she-bear* and these are her cubs, and nobody's going to touch them—including her husband. And the father is relegated to be a spectator in his own home with his own children. This is the nurturing instinct out of control. Mothering has become smothering, and everybody loses in that scenario.

One of the things that greatly saddens my heart is when I hear wives and mothers treating their husbands like their children. Your husband is not a child. He's a man. Mothers start running the house. They start running the children. They start running the schedule. And they start running him, treating him like he's a child, bossing him around, telling him what to do. Ladies, I'm telling you, as a man, I cannot express enough how that emasculates a man. And I'm also telling you this: As a man, we will do what is necessary to regain our manhood—and every way we do that is bad. Maybe we become passive aggressive; maybe we just become passive; maybe we find our manhood in our vocation, in the marketplace, and we just check out at home. It's our way of saying, "You are not going to treat me like a child." Maybe I become a bully at home because I'm trying to man up and say, "You aren't going to treat me that way." And ladies, you need to understand how vulnerable that makes a man to someone who might treat him like a man again. This is a very serious problem. He's not a child—he's a man.

You say, "Well, if I allowed my husband to discipline my children, he just wouldn't do it right." What you mean is: he would do it differently. But isn't that exactly the point? We told him last week how he's supposed to do this. It's between him and God, if he's going to listen to that, but he is going to do it differently. Part of what makes you as the mother so awesome with your children is that you have this bond and this connection and this emotion with your children that is so special, but that doesn't always lend itself to objective discipline. Emotion and discipline are not a good combination. To be honest with you, there's been a few times where I've had to say to Patti, "Honey, you are pretty wound up right now emotionally; just let me handle it." And she lets me handle it because she trusts me. There're other times where I'm ramping up because I think it's

time for dad to do a little discipline, and Patti will say, "I don't think so. I think this is a moment for compassion. This is a moment for nurturing. There's more going on here that you aren't seeing." And I have to trust her with that. She's got really great instincts, and so it's a mutual trust—it's teamwork.

Now we are back to where we started. That's why a healthy marriage is so important to effective parenting—because it's built on trust. And if you don't trust each other, this is never going to work. For some of you couples here this morning, the most important thing you could do to improve your parenting is to address your marriage. Let me just be kind of blunt about that. If nothing up to this point has motivated you to do what's necessary to address a broken marriage, maybe your mutual love for your children would be enough to cause you to do something to fix a marriage that's breaking down. Most parents would say, "I would die for my children." Then do it! Die to yourself; die to your selfishness; die to your own expectation; die...because that is the first step that is necessary to begin to repair a broken-down marriage. If for no other reason, do it for your children.

Just a couple of closing comments then: Sometimes couples will say, "You know, it's funny; you talk about the discipline side, the nurturing side, but for us as a couple, it's kind of reversed." In other words, the husband's a little bit more nurturing and the wife's a little bit more kind of the disciplinarian driver—and I get that. Sometimes that's just true of the temperament of a husband and wife. But here's my suggestion: Instead of saying, "Let's just swap the roles," what about growing a little bit, in order to become more like Christ? What if that father became a little bit more of a coach, a little bit more of a disciplinarian, a little bit more of an instructor? And what if that wife tried to become a little bit more nurturing, a little more tender, in order to cultivate these sides of our character to become more like Christ? I would tell you I am way more caring and compassionate and sensitive today than I was thirty-two years ago, having been married to Patti and raised three girls. This has been part of my story—and we are probably all thankful that that's true. But that's part of how God grows us and changes us and makes us more like Christ.

Now for all of us: every single one of us was parented in some way. And how you were parented has dramatically affected your view of God. Do you find God to be your place of refuge, your place of safety? Is He the One you run to when life gets hard, when the storms rage outside? And they will rage. If you can honestly say, "No, for me, that's just not true; I've not found God to be that for me," I'd encourage you to wrestle with the question: Why is that? And does it have something to do with the way you were parented, what you experienced growing up? Do you have to begin to make some corrections to your view of God? What if you grew up in a home where your father was abusive? He was abusive to your mom, or he was abusive to you, and your mom just passively took it year after year after year. Perhaps you formulated that as a view of God—that God is passive and He just watches in the midst of the storms. He seems almost indifferent. Why do you think that of God? Is it possible because God looks a lot like your mom who just passively took it year after year? You have to kind of start to unpack that and try to figure out: what is my view of God?

One of the ways you can help bring correction—I talked last week about ways to kind of separate out heavenly Daddy from our earthly daddy. Another way you can do that is just turn it around and run it through your own grid as a parent. In other words, regardless of what you experienced with your parents, think about your own heart for your own child, and how you love your child, and how you are for your child, and how you celebrate your child, and how you'd do anything for your child, and how you so want to be a place of refuge for your child. Then stop and think about: that's how God loves you. That's how God parents you. That's what God feels for you. So another way you

can regain this right view of God is to run it through your own feelings for your own children and to realize that's a more accurate picture of how God feels about you.

For those of you that are mothers, again I remind you this morning: you have such a high and holy calling—I would suggest to you the highest, holiest calling you'll have in your life. Your assignment is to rightly represent God at home, and to represent God as a place of safety, a place of refuge, a place where a child can go in the midst of the storm, in order that a child one day would understand God that way and have this place of refuge in order to get through a life that is guaranteed to have its storms. It's a high and holy calling that you would rightly represent God at home.

*Father, we're thankful that You are the perfect parent. Lord, I thank You for mothers. Lord, this auditorium is filled with mothers that love You, and they love their children. They want to rightly represent You at home. Lord, just give them what they need. Give them supernatural wisdom and discernment in a very difficult assignment. Lord, there are people here this morning that live everyday with anxiety and fear and struggles. And if they are to be honest, they would say there's just nowhere to go because they have never known You as a place of safety. Lord, I pray that You would give them what they need to begin to separate out whatever is incorrect in their view of You that keeps them from experiencing You as that place of safety. For this we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.*

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