

## God Understands Hard, Thankless Parenting

Mother's Day is difficult for many. But Scripture portrays a Father who knows our plight.

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For some women, getting through Mother's Day can't come quickly enough. As the parent of a child with autism, I may never hear a spontaneous "I love you, Mom!" because disability has hampered communication. For other mothers, their arms ache from the void left by a child no longer alive to embrace or a child who's emotionally impaired or simply estranged from them.

Others pull double duty as both mother and father because of deployment, divorce, or death. There's no supportive spouse around to prompt the children into charming displays of appreciation, no one to fête and pamper mom as "queen of the day." Even "normal mothers" struggle with feeling inadequate. (Deep down, we suspect we're not good enough to warrant special treatment anyway.)

As residents of a broken planet, these women represent a diverse yet silent majority. We occupy a conflicted space, a shared identity in the sisterhood

of otherness. However, for those of us who feel undone by the various losses of motherhood, we take comfort in a God who grieves with us and for us. Scripture gives us vivid pictures of how God understands the brokenhearted parent:

In Genesis 1, the Father of the universe prepared paradise for his children. His return on investment? A mere three chapters in, those children betrayed him. By Noah's account, God's heart was filled with pain, and he regretted having them at all (Gen. 6:6).

Mary, the most exalted and "highly favored" mother of Jesus, was rewarded for her faithfulness with a broken heart described as "a sword that will pierce [her] own soul" (Luke 2:34–36). Even Jesus, who was "in very nature God," was met with contempt and crucifixion at the hands of those he came to serve and save.

For the mother and child alienated from one other, we see a God who longs to gather his children together just "as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings" (Matt. 23:37). In Isaiah, too, God's love for his people is described in terms of motherhood:

But Zion said, "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." 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! (Isa. 49:14–15) For the mother gutted at the loss of a child, God's ear is attuned to great mourning (Jer. 31:15). He also extends compassion for the suffering of pregnant women and nursing mothers (Matt. 24:19). Just as God saw Hagar, discarded and destitute in the desert, he is still the El Roi God who cherishes the devalued (Gen. 16:1–13).

As the mother of a non-verbal child with multiple disabilities, I have turned to these stories for comfort. Like most mothers, parenting offers equal parts joy and jilting, grief and gratitude. But in the extremes of special-needs parenting, the highs are higher and the lows can be debilitating.

After 14 years of intense behavioral, occupational, and speech therapies, my teenage son functions verbally at the level of a three-year-old. His communication skills have evolved slowly. It took years of drills and interventions before he could even label me positively by pairing my picture with the word *Mommy* on a flash card.

To this day, Jeremy doesn't say, "I love you," on his own, but he will echo it back when scripted. Over the years, I've learned to appreciate Mother's Day cards that were drawn with the full support of a skilled occupational therapist, hand-over-hand. Love demands a response but doesn't always get one. At least, not in the way we wish.

For mothers like me, Mother's Day doesn't have to be *happy*. But in God's sovereignty, it can still be holy, and even blessed. Motherhood can be the sharpest tool in heaven's drawer, wielded and aimed toward our sanctification. Through the thankless tasks of raising and refining our children, our God raises and refines us. The Lord doesn't just use us to raise our children; he's using our children to raise us.

Any devastation can be repurposed in the hands of a gracious God to break, chisel, and mold us into greater Christlikeness. We're nearer to the Cross, too, when we love, serve, and sacrifice with nary a word of thanks (Luke 23:39-43). For those who forfeit flowers and cards here on earth, a greater glory accrues for us in heaven: a crown and a Savior await us there.

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