



Taste & See

by Kathy Nesper

The Bible provides us with many metaphors of God as our mother. When explored, they help us draw nearer to a God who cherishes and nurtures us.

“Taste and see that the Lord is good...” (Psalm 34:8).

The baby is fresh from his mother’s womb, naked, blinking in the unaccustomed light. He lies peacefully cushioned on the warm, bare skin of her now flaccid abdomen, just below and between her breasts. Her hand rests gently on his bottom as she speaks softly to him.

He lifts his head and nods it like a bobble-head doll against her breastbone. He draws up one leg and pushes against her, gaining traction in the soft folds of her belly. He pushes again with the other leg, and repeating the crawling motion he inches upward until his head rests atop one of her breasts.

He begins again to bounce his head over her skin, his mouth open. He finds her nipple, bobs until it is centered in his mouth, and begins to suckle, contented.¹

Nearly unbelievable, isn’t it? Yet a healthy newborn with senses not dulled by pain medication from labor and left undisturbed on her mother’s abdomen will make this journey less than an hour after birth. In God’s design, she bobs, nuzzles, licks, and then *tastes*...and begins to learn the warm, comforting goodness of the one from whom the milk flows.

As a breastfeeding advisor, childbirth educator, and doula (or trained labor support person) for three decades, I have been privileged to witness many scenes of women in labor and of newborns with their parents. They leave me in awe for many reasons, but I especially appreciate the way they help plumb the depths of Scripture.

While we are all familiar with the biblical metaphors of God as our father, many people are surprised to learn that the Bible also uses metaphors for God as our mother. Sadly, we rarely hear sermons or read articles on this topic. Yet the Bible is rich with birth, breastfeeding, and parenting metaphors, many placing God in the role of mother to us, the children. When explored, these metaphors help us understand and draw nearer to a God who cherishes and nurtures us.

“Like newborn infants, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good” (1 Peter 2:2–3).

The infant is restless, and she begins to wave her arms and kick her legs. One tiny fist grazes her cheek, and she instinctively turns toward it, mouth open. Her mother is distracted and doesn't notice, so the little one begins to cry.



Here in the second chapter of his first letter, Peter expands on Psalm 34:8 using a rich feminine metaphor to explain both God's goodness and our need for God's sustenance. Once the infant has “tasted” and seen that his mother is good because

her body provides for his needs and her embrace at the breast comforts him with her soothing heartbeat in his ear, he “longs for the milk.” Often! He expresses his longing loudly and insistently if she overlooks his early hunger cues of restlessness.

The apostle tells us that once we are aware of God's goodness, we should *long* for the milk — the nurture and nourishment — of God's presence with all the intensity of a newborn infant who senses hunger. How might we grow as believers if we were as insistent, as often, in seeking out God's own embrace? How much more would the words of Scripture mean if we took time to listen for God's heartbeat in them as we read? How meaningful our prayers if we paused to sense the loving arms around us and to rest our weary heads against God's own breast?

“...crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation...” (1 Peter 2:2–3).

He drinks with long, drawing sucks, punctuated with swallows. He is blissfully unaware of the biological gifts within the milk; he only knows that it satisfies him.

He may not recognize its benefits, but an infant at the breast is intent on obtaining the life-giving, biologically “living” fluid that will sustain his life.

Components in a mother's milk keep it pure from germs and ready to feed. It is exactly the right temperature at all times. It never “runs out” but is made constantly, even as the baby suckles. The milk of a mother who has been exposed to an illness even provides biologically specific antibodies to her baby.

Human milk is completely unique to each individual mother-baby pair. The milk of a premature baby's mother has higher levels of protein and immune factors than if the birth had been full term. Even an individual mother's milk varies over time, with increased enzymes to

protect against diarrhea when the baby begins to crawl on the floor, and with reduced protein levels when she is a year old and eating solid foods. It is ideally suited at each stage to help the child grow appropriately.

Peter's metaphor illustrates our own depth of need for God's nurture and protection against the disease of sin, enabling us to "grow into salvation." We need to multiply the healthy cells of our faith and to grow into maturity through intimacy with God. Like the baby's physical needs, our spiritual needs change as we move through life stages and challenges — and God is always available with the response appropriate to each individual's unique need.

The insights go in both directions. Spiritual awareness has informed my choices as a birth professional — and as a parent and grandparent myself.

It is dangerous to turn the Bible into a "how-to manual" it was never intended to be, so we need to take care not to misapply it. But it can, at the least, stimulate valuable questions. For example, what did Peter know that caused him to say so casually that a new baby "tastes" her mother's goodness even before craving a first feeding?

The sight of a newborn infant instinctively "swimming" up the mother's bare abdomen to her breast may have been familiar to parents in some cultures throughout history, as well as in some cultures today. Unfortunately, it is not often observed in Western hospitals where medication can dull the baby's responses; the "efficient" procedures of weighing, bathing, diapering, and bundling are applied soon after birth; and the clock is then watched until the baby successfully "latches on" to the breast for the first time. We have (re)discovered only in the past two decades that some practices can interfere with instinctive behaviors that benefit both mother and baby. Perhaps we might have recognized it sooner if we had pondered Peter's observation.

In our parenting decisions, we might also consider the biblical implication that a baby can be aware of goodness, even love, in the way parents respond from the earliest moments. What practices will communicate this best? We know that the mother's and father's behavior sets the tone for the growing child's understanding of God as parent. One of the best questions we can ask of ourselves is this: "What traits of God do I want to teach my baby? How can I respond to her in ways that will communicate those traits in *me*?"

This is anything but easy, especially when the infant awakes for the third time in the night! Yet we can draw strength from remembering that God's goodness and patience should be evident in our response.

Again and again, though it is not a step-by-step parenting guide, Scripture can bring practical insights through the ways God models parenting for us. The mirror image is also true: the very earthy experiences of bringing life into the world and nurturing it at the breast offer new understanding of spiritual things. Pope John Paul II captured this truth: "The [human] body, in fact...is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine."² He spoke of human sexual relations, but his words are no less true about the acts of motherhood.

I am thankful in new ways every time I have an opportunity to observe these tender moments — and to know my God better as a result.

Her nursing has slowed, and her mouth relaxes, releasing the suction. She immediately draws the breast back into her mouth, desiring its comfort even in her sleep. Eventually she is overcome, her eyelids close, her limbs relax, and her mouth goes slack. She is content.

A substance in the mother's milk induces drowsiness in the infant, so that she often falls asleep at the breast by God's own design. Her hunger satiated, her heart stilled by her mother's embrace, she can relax and rest.

We stand over her and wish we could once again know that depth of peace. But when we see through new eyes that the intimacy she has just experienced at her mother's breast is still intended for us through God's own presence, even as adults, we can learn from her example:

"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8).

1. This is my account of an actual scene in the wonderful short DVD *Delivery Self-Attachment* by Lennart Righard, MD, available at www.geddesproduction.com.
2. Cited in West, Christopher. *A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body*. Carpentersville, Illinois: The Gift Foundation, 2002.



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