

CATHERINE MCNIEL

Long Days of Small Things

MOTHERHOOD AS A SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE



DISCUSSION GUIDE







Overview

All too often, our experience of motherhood can seem like a barrier to traditional spiritual development: We struggle to find the free time for prayer, study, meditation, worship, and service . . . just to name a few. But if we pay attention, we find ourselves constantly pushed toward service, surrender, sacrifice, and perseverance. These are tools that richly develop our souls no matter our season. Catherine helps us understand the power of reframing our motherhood experience in this way: “I hadn’t known that I felt invisible until I felt seen. I hadn’t realized how thankless the ceaseless sacrifices of motherhood felt until someone gently pointed me to their honor and value” (page 2).

Discussion Questions

1. How has motherhood surprised you?
 - a. What has been better than you expected? What has been harder? What has changed you?
2. Describe a time when you felt invisible, unseen, and unappreciated.
3. What comes to mind when you consider spiritual practices?
4. How would you describe your spiritual life during these “long days of small things”?

Practices

1. The practices of *breathing*, *walking*, and *being* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn’t?
3. What was surprising?
4. What is valuable and worth keeping?
 - a. Where can you imagine incorporating these in the coming week?



Overview

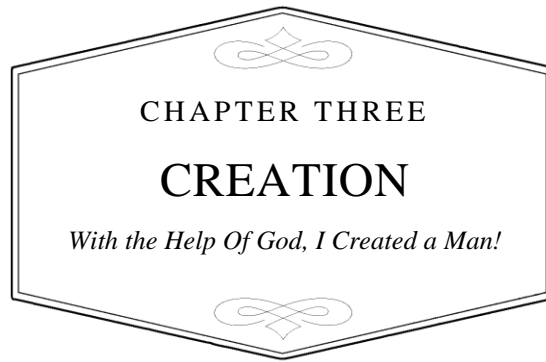
God's most powerful work in the world was physical. He came to us as a baby, inside Mary's womb. He was born into a family, lived, and died . . . and was resurrected into a new body, promising *new creation* to the creatures he lovingly made. We can reframe our own motherhood experience by looking at the Gospel through the eyes of a mother . . . and finding Jesus "in the flesh-and-blood world of crumbs in the car seat and missed-nap tantrums" (page 26).

Discussion Questions

1. Take a moment to reflect on the Bible stories we know so well, through the eyes of Mary.
 - a. How would you have responded to the angel's news: the most unexpected of surprise pregnancies?
 - b. Did you have to travel during your pregnancy, or with a newborn? What would have concerned you about the trip to Bethlehem, or delivery in the stable?
 - c. What things do you imagine Mary "stored up in her heart" as the mother of Jesus, watching him grow from a baby, to a child, to a man? How do you think her experience was similar to yours?
2. Describe the difference between the Hebrew and Greek ways of understanding spirituality and God's work in our lives.
 - a. Which of these worldviews have had the most impact on your own thinking of spirituality?
3. How does motherhood teach us about God's creative, redemptive work in the world?

Practices

1. The practices of *eating and drinking*, *cooking*, and *household tasks* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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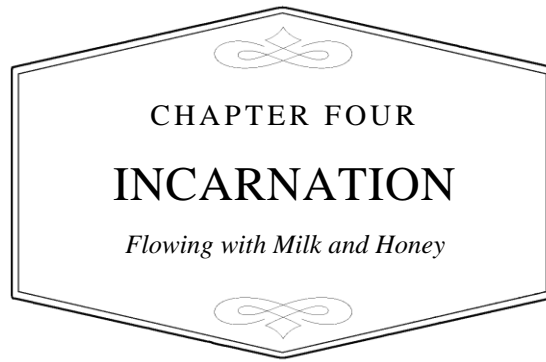
As we experience the audacious ups-and-downs of pregnancy, we are front-and-center to the reality that “creation is one of God’s signature moves” (page 39). And, amazingly, God has asked women to join him uniquely in the act and process of creation.

Discussion Questions

1. If you are a mother, did you adopt or birth your children? Either way, reflect on how the process was *creation*.
2. In this amazing season of creation, what did you learn about God that you didn’t realize or understand before?
3. Imagine yourself as Eve, the first mother. What might she have felt during that first pregnancy, when she said “with the help of God I created a man!”?
4. Look through a few of the creation stories in the Bible: Genesis 1, Genesis 2, Job 38, Psalm 34. What do we learn about God in these passages? What do we learn about creation?
5. What does it mean to you that God has gifted women with a unique ability to join him in creation? How is that different or similar to the way you’ve understood womanhood in the past?

Practices

1. The practices of *menstruation*, *sex*, and *awakening* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn’t?
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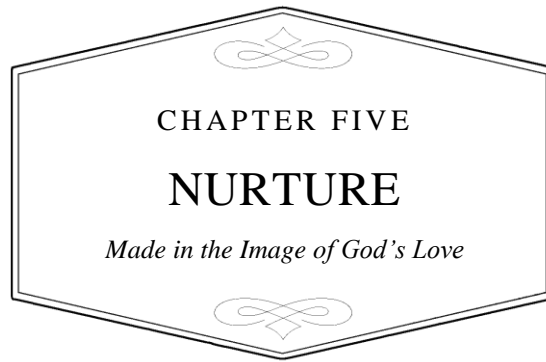
There is nothing quite so physical as motherhood, is there? We drip with blood, amniotic fluid, and breastmilk. We receive crumbling mud pies and offer sticky peanut-butter sandwiches. In caring for our children we are doused in every possible fluid and mess on a daily basis. This jars against what we long for and admire both in our homes and in our spirits—being *totally clean*, believing that good moms and good spirituality are white and spotless. But this has never, ever been true. Jesus taught the Gospel while walking through the dirt, sitting in a smelly fishing boat. He taught about sheep, bread, water, and soil. Consider these words from Catherine: “Is it possibly that, in the wonders of creation and incarnation and the life-giving routines we are always acting out, we pass through sacraments—are covered in, coated in, up to our elbows in sacraments—every day? Perhaps there are a million stories about lost library books, mismatched socks, sliced grapes, and unrinsed sippy cups that begin with ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mother, who . . .’” (page 66).

Discussion Questions

1. If you’ve given birth, reflect on the experience and share your story!
2. Take a moment to google the website “It’s Like They Know Us.” What makes these images and captions so funny?
 - a. How is your real life different from what is depicted here?
 - b. Why are we so drawn to the image of *perfect and put together*?
3. Jesus met us by taking on a body and becoming fully human. Then he taught us about the Kingdom of God by touching, tasting, and talking about the real, everyday ingredients of working-class life. If God was sitting in *your* town, mom group, or living room today, what aspects of your life do you think he might touch, taste, and talk about?
4. In what tangible parts of *your* daily life have you encountered God, and what did they teach you?

Practices

1. The practices of *body*, *breastfeeding*, and *water* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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Overview

One of the most enduring messages of the Bible is that God is *loving*. And this love is most often portrayed as parent-love, the love a mother or father has for a child. Whatever else these years of mommy-hood entail, we spend much of our energy each day caring for, nurturing, and loving our children. In doing so, we are image-bearers of God himself, pointing ourselves and others to the unfailing love of the Creator. As Catherine says, “We step into a loving, nurturing role that is *at the very heart of who God is*. We mimic him, following in his footsteps, echoing his identity” (pg. 85).

Discussion Questions

1. What are some lovey-dovey parenting moments that you have experienced—where the love was something you could tangibly feel?
2. Now, tell stories of “harder love” moments you’ve had with your children—where you acted to care for them simply because it needed to be done (ie, getting up in the middle of the night . . . again.)
3. Take a look at a few passages of Scripture that describe God as a parent. How do these strike you? What do they communicate to the original ancient reader? What do they communicate to us?

Deuteronomy 32:11-12

Hosea 11:1, 3-4

Isaiah 49:15

Isaiah 66:13

Matthew 23:37

Luke 13:34

4. How does our ceaseless work as mothers reflect a foundational characteristic of God?

Practices

5. The practices of *cherish*, *discipline*, and *sleep* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
6. What worked and what didn't?
7. What was surprising?
8. What is valuable and worth keeping?
 - a. Where can you imagine incorporating these in the coming week?



Overview

Service and *solitude* are two of the classic spiritual disciplines . . . but they look very different in motherhood. The service we do is unrelenting in our homes and families, yet even we often don't recognize it as "spiritual" work that can be offered to God and benefit our souls. It is often this service that renders us isolated and lonely—a very different sort of solitude than the peaceful times of prayer we might prefer. But God meets us in these isolated days of service. Consider this question: "If God came to earth in the position of a servant, must he not deeply value service?" (page 104).

Discussion Questions

1. Describe some of the acts of service you do as a mother.
 - a. Have you considered this work a spiritual discipline? Why or why not?
 - b. How might this aspect of motherhood be forming your spirit?
2. Describe a time when you felt isolated and alone as a mother.
 - a. How is this sense of isolation different from the time alone we often crave?
 - b. How might you find God waiting for you in the isolation?
3. "I have nothing left." Have you ever felt or said this? Is there a way that this group could help bring a watering stream to your wilderness?
4. Have you encountered God the way Hagar did? How does it feel to realize that he sees you?

Practices

1. The practices of *silence*, *diapers*, and *work* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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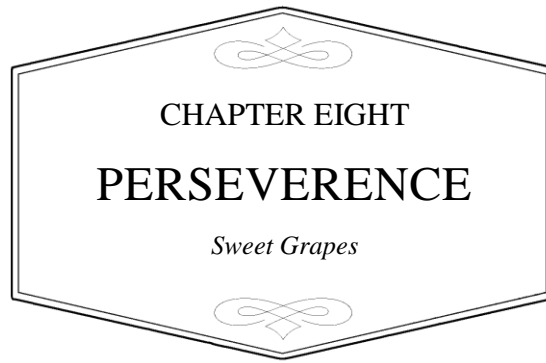
Though motherhood is a blessing, it can empty us of everything we have. From conception on, we are forced to sacrifice and surrender to things we cannot control: whether a surprise pregnancy or infertility, an emergency C-section or weeks of “overdue” waiting. And in loving this child we become even more acutely aware that we cannot control what will come. Consider these words from Catherine: “There are many forces that form our spirits, and two of the most potent are sacrifice and surrender. How we respond to them will determine if we emerge from life strong and beautiful or brittle and bitter. And in motherhood, we meet these twin crucibles every single day” (page 117).

Discussion Questions

1. How has motherhood required you to sacrifice, to pour yourself out?
2. Where has motherhood required you to surrender?
3. How have these “twin crucibles” shaped who you are today?
 - a. Do you agree that the demands of sacrifice and surrender can make us strong and beautiful or brittle and bitter? What response do you find yourself tending toward?
4. If you feel safe enough, talk honestly about the pain that goes along with motherhood. Where are you at today? What do you need to keep going?
5. Catherine says, “Take heart, mama. Surrender is not a promise that our hands will always be open—it simply means granting God eternal permission to pry open our clenched fists” (page 126). What do you think this looks like in your life?

Practices

1. The practices of *pain*, *driving*, and *clutter* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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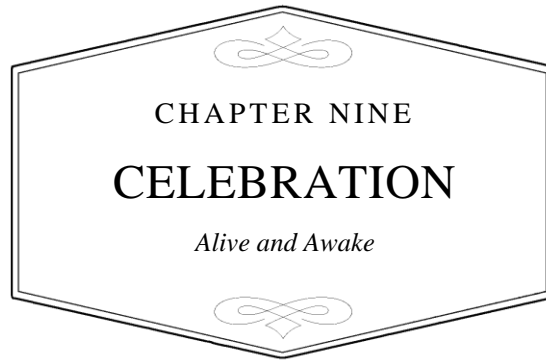
Whatever season of motherhood we may be in, whatever else we may be doing, and whatever our situation, mothers *persevere*. Each and every day we get up and keep going, through sleepless nights, financial crisis, marriage troubles, and frightening diagnoses. Mothers keep making lunches and going to work and paying the bills and tucking our kids into bed, no matter what. And while we are too busy and too tired to notice, this daily act of persevering is one of the most powerful forces on our spirits. As Catherine describes, “somehow, in all this, we grow strong and lovely” (page 144).

Discussion Questions

1. What tasks and challenges in your life call for perseverance today?
2. First Corinthians 13:4 says, “Love suffers long and is kind” (NASB) but Catherine says that her love “suffers a short while and gets impatient” (pg. 143). How does loving your kids bring you to the end of your own strength?
3. What areas of struggle in your life have you later realized turned into fruit and flower, making you more beautiful than before?
 - a. What do you hope God may be developing in you through these struggles?

Practices

1. The practices of *routine*, *gratitude*, and *music* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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Overview

Life comes to us every day in a bittersweet package of beauty and pain. Spiritual disciplines teach us to find God’s presence both in the joy and in the suffering, to *practice* seeing him in our daily lives. Motherhood is “fertile ground for this practicing, because our mundane moments are ripe with opportunities to lose our grip, our patience, ourselves. . . . [H]e is waiting for us here, inviting us to rest in the nurturing arms of the One who invented the idea of mothers and fathers and children” (pages 166-167).

Discussion Questions

1. Describe some moments where the wonder of being “alive and awake” took your breath away.
2. Catherine suggests that the discipline of rejoicing is often like physical therapy: We practice because life is painful, not because it is easy. When has rejoicing felt more like therapy than celebration to you?
3. Do you think of spiritual practices as things we *must* do to please God or things we *can* do to open our eyes to his loving presence, already surrounding us? How does this second way of practicing change everything?
4. In chapter nine and in “One Last Thing,” Catherine says that God has placed important truth into our daily lives and experiences that we cannot learn any other way.
 - a. Where have you seen this?
 - b. What have you learned about God through motherhood?
 - c. Why does the world need our unique voices and perspective?

Practices

1. The practices of *seeing*, *hearing*, and *touching* are aspects of life that can allow us to grow into the presence of God. Describe your experience of trying these.
2. What worked and what didn't?
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