

Psalm 91

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[0 : 01] So, as I mentioned to begin the service just a few moments ago, today is Mother's Day, or as some prefer to call it, Mothering Sunday. I'm not too sure what the correct terminology is. I've heard different views as to in what country you're meant to call it one or other.

But anyway, it's not of great importance. And I wonder, given that it's Mother Day, should we mark the day with a slightly adapted recital of the Lord's Prayer, Our Mother Who Art in Heaven? Would that be something appropriate to do? We're not going to do it in case anybody's even for a moment concerned. I think most of you would recoil at that prospect. And yet, our text this evening uses motherly, feminine language to describe God.

He will cover you with His feathers and under His wings you will find refuge. The picture is of that mother bird protecting her young. And if motherly language is used to describe God, not only on this occasion, also in Psalm 17 that we sung, and on a number of other occasions as we'll discover in a few moments. If motherly language is used to describe God, why not address God in such language? Well, that's the question that I pose. And if we take the view that we shouldn't address God in such language, we need to know why. Why wouldn't we do that? We live in a day, we live in a context when there are those who would say that we should. There are churches, using that word in its broadest interpretation, where you would have the Lord's Prayer recited in the manner that I was somewhat provocatively suggesting, our mother who art in heaven. You may have heard just, I think it was just in the past few months, there was a news item about the Church of Sweden. It's a Lutheran church.

I think their official title would be Lutheran Evangelical Church. Although I think the understanding of the word evangelical would be very different to perhaps how we would understand that word. But nonetheless, a Protestant church in the Lutheran tradition in Sweden, a very large church in the context of that country, a church that most Swedes would associate with in some way, however superficial that the connection might be. And in that church, the leadership of the church determined and instructions were given to the clergy to refrain from using masculine pronouns for God, indeed any pronouns, female or masculine, because they felt that that wasn't the right way to address God. I don't know how they would deal with the Lord's Prayer, whether it works that you could do our father one day and then our mother the next to maintain some kind of balance. I don't know.

But bizarre as it may seem to us, that is the kind of position that is being defended and propagated within the Christian church in its broadest expression. What I want to do this evening is a few things, each of them quite briefly, as we consider this matter and reflect on the feminine imagery that the Bible does use to describe God's character and God's actions. That, of course, are a reflection of His character. What I want to do is just, first of all, just establish very briefly some basic theological foundations that can inform any thought or consideration of this.

[3 : 48] What I want to do is survey, I suppose, the feminine or motherly images that are used in the Bible and just have some sense of the frequency of them and the nature of them. And then move on to having done that to consider if these images that are used would justify using feminine titles for God. Before moving on to the verse that we have focused on in our reading, verse 4 of Psalm 91, to draw out the significance of the motherly picture of God that is set out in our text. And we'll do that briefly. It's not going to be a sermon as we would normally preach a sermon where the bulk of our time would be spent on that verse.

That is not going to be the way we're going to deal with the matter this evening. Finally, what we'll do, and I'm just kind of laying out for you where we're going, finally we'll consider how this language that we find in Psalm 91 and elsewhere points to Jesus and His saving work on our behalf. So, that's kind of where we're going. First of all then, some theological foundations that are good to have clear in our minds as we consider this matter. I think there are two core theological foundations that we need to bear in mind. No doubt there are others that would be relevant, but two core ones. The first one concerns the nature of God. Jesus, who should know a thing or two about the nature of God, tells us, as recorded in John's Gospel chapter 4, that God is spirit. God is not male in the sense of biological male. Male is a biological word, and God is not a biological being. So, God is spirit. That's fundamental for us to be clear on as we think about these matters. Another fundamental theological foundation concerns what we're told in Genesis about the creation of men and women. And what is it that we're told in Genesis chapter 1 and verse 27 about this very key event in the history of the universe, the creation of men and women? Well, in that verse, in verse 27 of the first chapter of the Bible, we read,

So God created man in His own image. In the image of God, He created him. Male and female, He created them. And I think from this verse, there's a lot we could draw out from this verse. But one thing that I think we can legitimately draw out from this verse is that it's clear that God, in His essential, divine essence, divine essence, if we can use that kind of language, is neither male nor female.

Maleness and femaleness, I'm not sure if that's a word, are part of God's creation. And both of which, maleness and femaleness, are rooted in and reflect the nature and character of God. God created man in His own image. Male and female, He created them. So male and female both reflect the image of God. Both are rooted in the character of God. A man alone or a woman alone does not as clearly reflect the image of God as a man and a woman. I think that's a conclusion we can legitimately draw from what we're told there in Genesis. So there are two key fundamental, key theological foundations. Just to move on to the second thing that I said that we would do, and that is to just survey the feminine or motherly images used of God in the Bible. Maybe to talk about surveying is rather grand because time doesn't allow us to do a survey of them. But let me just note two things about this general reality of the use of this feminine, motherly imagery in the Bible. Two things. First of all, to just mention its frequency, but then also to comment on its nature. In what way do we find this imagery used? In terms of its frequency, it's difficult, I think, to kind of give some kind of definitive number that you find this imagery used on X occasions. There are some verses, some passages that you could, you know, argue the case whether the imagery is indeed being used to describe God or not. But even allowing for some, you know, space for debate on some of the passages, I think you can conservatively estimate that well over 20 times in the Bible you have the feminine, motherly imagery used to describe God's character and actions.

If any of you are interested in kind of exploring this more deeply and looking at all the verses that some at least would argue fall into this category, there's an interesting article on the Desiring God website. So that's John Piper's website. And if you just get into that website, Google Desiring God, and then in the search facility within the website, I think the article is called Our Mother Who Art in Heaven, which is my idea for starting the sermon in this way. So again, it's just a provocative title to draw you into reading the article, I suppose. But it deals with this in much greater depth than I'm going to do this evening, and you might find that interesting if you do want to pursue this a little bit more. So in terms of its frequency, it is relatively frequent. You know, I wouldn't say it's prolific, but it is relatively frequent that you have this imagery used. But more interestingly perhaps is its nature. I think in the Old Testament, especially if we focus on the Old Testament, where most of this imagery is found, though there are also occasions in the New Testament. But in the Old Testament, the feminine or motherly imagery, in fact, I think it's almost all motherly, divides into three broad categories that have, of course, overlap between them. But I think we can distinguish them. First of all, you have one category is the imagery of giving birth. So where God is spoken of as giving birth. Now that's clearly feminine imagery. It's clearly motherly imagery. And you find that on a number of occasions that God is described in these terms as one who gives birth. Let me just give one example. Just for reasons of time, as I look at these different categories, I'll just, you know, give one or two examples to illustrate. So the one that I'm going to give in terms of the imagery of giving birth in Deuteronomy chapter 32, and in verse 18, we read, and this is Israel being challenged as to their loyalty to God.

[11 : 06] And we read, you deserted the rock who fathered you. There's the language of father. But then it goes on to say, you forgot the God who gave you birth. So very explicit. You forgot the God who gave you birth. The imagery is feminine. It's motherly. And it's been used to describe God. God is using it of Himself in reproaching His people. So that's one category, the imagery of giving birth. The second category, which is probably more frequent, is the imagery of protection, especially the image of protecting wings. In Psalm 91 that we've noticed, in Psalm 17 that we've sung. And maybe if I just draw your attention to one other occasion where you find this language of, or this imagery of protection, in Ruth chapter 2 and verse 12. So Ruth chapter 2 and verse 12, we read,

May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord. So these are words being addressed to Boaz. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to find refuge. Rather, Boaz addressing Ruth. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.

There's also another interesting use of this motherly imagery in Hosea chapter 13 and verse 8. And I think on the only occasion where it's not the picture of a bird, a mother bird, but the picture of a wild and fierce bear, but very much a mother bear. And let me just quickly find that one. Hosea chapter 13 and verse 8. And we probably need to read from verse 4 just to get the idea. So God is addressing His people and He says, But I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but Me, no Savior except Me. I cared for you in the desert, in the land of burning heat. When I fed them, they were satisfied. When they were satisfied, they became proud. Then they forgot Me. So I will come upon them like a lion. Like a leopard, I will lurk by the path. Like a bear robbed of her cubs, I will attack them and rip them open. Like a lion, I will devour them. A wild animal will tear them apart. It's not very attractive language, but nonetheless, the imagery being used is of this mother bear. And God is saying,

I will behave like a mother bear whose cubs have been stolen from her. Such is my concern to recover my people, my children, those I have given birth to, to mix the metaphors that we find. So the imagery of giving birth is one category, the imagery of protection. And then thirdly, and this is very similar to the second, but I think we can distinguish is the imagery of nurture and care. Now, I'm not suggesting for a moment that it's only mothers who nurture and care. I would hope that as fathers we also participate in nurturing and caring for our children. But I think it is legitimate to identify that as a picture or a responsibility that we often particularly identify with mothers. So for example, one example of that in Isaiah chapter 66 and verse 13 and 14, we read, as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you. So God is comparing

Himself to a mother, and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. When you see this, your heart will rejoice and you will flourish like grass. The hand of the Lord will be made known to His servants. Well, I'm going beyond what we need to read. Just that verse 13, as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you, and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. So the picture of nurture and care of a mother caring for her child. So that's just a brief survey of the frequency of this imagery in the Scriptures and the categories in which we could place the different references that we have. But then that leads us to the question that I was kind of posing in the beginning. Do these images, does this feminine motherly language, does it justify use of feminine titles for God? I think there are two points to make. The first one is really pretty obvious, but it's worth stressing, that all of these pictures are that. They're pictures. They're images. They're metaphors. That's what they are. This is picture language.

[15 : 56] God isn't saying He's a bird. He's not saying He's a bear, but He is saying that He acts like a mother bird or a mother bear. Indeed, such imagery is used in the Bible to describe men, not just to describe God, but to describe men. Motherly or feminine image is used on occasion to describe men in the Bible. Let me just give you a couple of examples of that. In 2 Samuel 17 and verse 8, we read as follows.

You don't really need to know the context of what's going on in this conversation, but just notice the language or the image you're used. You know your father and his men. They are fighters. So male soldiers are being spoken of, and as fierce as a wild bear robbed of her cubs. So very similar to the Hosea passage, but here not speaking of God, but speaking of soldiers, of men of war, fierce as a mother bear robbed of her cubs. Now, I don't think anybody would suggest that that image is saying that these soldiers were women. Clearly not. They were men, but their actions resembled the actions of a female mother bear. In the New Testament, Paul uses feminine language to describe himself.

I think perhaps for reasons of time we won't look up the passages because I suspect you're familiar with them. But there are passages, at least on a couple of occasions, I'll give you the references if you do want to take note, in Galatians 4.19, also in 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 7, where Paul speaks of giving birth to those he is writing to. So he was instrumental in bringing the gospel to them. It was through Paul that they came to faith, and Paul uses that picture of having given birth to these believers. So he uses motherly feminine language to speak of himself. Now, I don't think anybody is suggesting, because he uses that language, that Paul was anything other than a man. So it is imagery.

That's the first thing to stress. The other thing to stress is to recognize that throughout the Bible, the titles for God, titles applied to God, are always male titles. There are no instances in the Bible of feminine titles being applied to God, be that mother or queen or whatever. God is described as like a mother, but he's never described as mother. Equally, no feminine pronouns are ever applied to God. To use, again, maybe somewhat provocative language, God, for the purposes of revealing himself to us, self-identifies as a male. This is God's prerogative to reveal himself to us as he sees fit. For us, it is simply to accept his wisdom in using the language that he chooses to describe himself. For us to assign, as some would wish to do, female titles or pronouns to God would be to undermine the inspiration of Scripture and imagine that we can improve on what God has revealed concerning himself. It would, in fact, be a form of idolatry, creating God after our own image, rather than receiving and acknowledging God as he presents himself to us. But let's move on to just think for a moment about the significance of the motherly picture of God in many of these texts that

I've mentioned, but perhaps focusing in more particularly on Psalm 91 and verse 4. He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge. What kind of God does that paint for us or present to us? Let me say three things that I think we can draw out about our God that is revealed in this picture that is painted of him. It certainly points to a God who comes down to us. The very fact that God would be willing to be so described or to so describe himself, to compare himself to a bird.

[20 : 16] God is in the most beautiful sense of the word. Generally, we use the word condescending with a very negative overtone. You know, to be condescending is a bad thing. But of course, to be condescending can be a very good thing in certain contexts. And God is, in the most beautiful sense of the word, condescending to us, condescending to us, condescending to us, in coming down to our level, that we might know him, that we might understand him, that we might appreciate who he is and what he is like.

And in this very language and imagery that he determines can be used to describe him, God is showing a beautiful condescension. But of course, the language also describes what God is like. He is a God who protects his children. He is a God who protects his children with tenderness and with passion, with jealousy. He is jealous for his own. That is the kind of God that we have, a God who protects, a God who cares, a God who loves, a God who shields us under the shadow of his wings.

And then maybe a third thing we can say, and all of these are very related. The imagery used portrays a God who is eminently accessible to his children. We just know that there is a place for us under his wings, just as the chicks know instinctively that they can run to the mother hen and there is a place for them. They don't need to ponder about it. They don't need to think about it. They don't need to wonder, well, will mother hen receive me? There is this instinctive knowledge and confidence that there is a place for them there, and so too with us as God's children. He is an accessible God, ever ready to receive us and to shelter us under his wings. Then one final thing I want to mention, and that is to consider how this language, this motherly feminine language of God as the one who protects us under the shadow of his wings under his feathers, how this language points to Jesus and his saving work on our behalf, and especially to think about this in the light of the Lord's Supper that we're going to be participating in in a moment. In our kind of brief survey, we didn't reference New Testament texts, but the clearest and most striking example is the language Jesus uses of himself as he surveys

Jerusalem. I did mention that at some point. In Luke chapter 13 and verse 34, you also have the parallel passage in Matthew, but if I just read Luke 13, 34, O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Well, many were not willing, hence the lament of Jesus. But of course, there were some who were willing, and those who were willing found refuge under the protection of Jesus, under his wings. And indeed, many continue to find that motherly protection in the person of Jesus. Just on Thursday, we had the lunch club here in Bonacord, and at the lunch club on Thursday, it was International Women's Day, and of course, we were looking forward to Mother's Day today. So, that was the kind of theme of the little thought for the day at lunch club.

And I shared with the folks there on Thursday a story of which I'm unsure as to its historicity.

[24 : 15] I suspect some of you have heard this story, and on Thursday I said, I'm not really sure if this is a true story, and given my intention to tell the story tonight, I thought I'd explore a little bit further, and the more I've explored, the less confident I am as to its historicity. I almost wish I hadn't explored, because it would be kind of cool if it was true. It may be true, I'm just not very sure, so I'm trying to be upfront and a measure of integrity in saying I'm not sure if it's true. However, the story is told of a fire at a farm, and it was a terrible fire. It consumed the farmhouse and the outbuildings, and the following day, the farmer was surveying all his losses. You can imagine how distraught he was as he saw this scene of destruction.

And as he surveyed all the destruction, he was walking along, and he saw before him a charred hen who had been consumed by the fire, along with so much else that had been consumed by the fire. And he was just walking past this charred hen, and he heard a rustle that kind of caught his attention, and he glanced over to this charred hen and just gave it a little kick. And as he did so, some chicks came running out from under the charred remains of the mother hen. Now, as I say, I don't know if that's a true story, but certainly it is told with the purpose of illustrating something of God's love for us, particularly in the person of Jesus. Jesus speaks of how He, His love for His people is a hen who looks to gather her chicks under her wings. And on the cross at Calvary, this is what Jesus did. He bore the fiery anger of God that was due on us, on Himself, and in that way protected us. He sheltered us under

His wings that we might live, that we might not suffer what He suffered there on Calvary, as He became a curse before God and bore God's anger and the punishment for sin that we rightly deserved. And so, as we participate in the Lord's Supper this evening, we do so giving thanks to God the Father for sending His Son to endure such a fate. We give thanks to Jesus the Son for being willing to be obedient unto death for us, and for the manner in which He did shield us, as it were, from the horror of God's righteous and just judgment. And it is this love of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we remember as we celebrate round the table.

So, we won't be praying our mother who art in heaven anytime soon or at all, but we do thank God for the motherly images that He uses to describe Himself and that speak of His tender protection and care for us, His children. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

We thank You for the richness of it. We thank You for the beauty of it. We thank You for the beautiful pictures and images and metaphors that portray to us in captivating and vivid language something of what You are like and of Your acts on our behalf. And for this, we are grateful. We pray that they would, sir, to encourage us and to instruct us that we would know You better and better appreciate the depth of Your tender, loving, protective care for us. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.