



# Reformation Ministries

Stephen N. Johnson

## GRACE TO YOU! “The Incredible Womb and the Empty Tomb”

The first century Jewish world in which Jesus lived stressed purity above all else. Because of impurity—sin—the nation of Israel had been destroyed and taken captive by Babylon in 587-586 B.C. Israel was fiercely resolute that such would never happen again. If the cause for the nation’s downfall was sin, purity would be their salvation.

The sect of the Pharisees arose to demand strict compliance with all Old Testament laws and quickly condemned anyone who broke the law and became spiritually and ceremonially impure. The sect of the Essenes so stressed purity of life that they became monastics, eschewing the contamination and temptation of sin in the cities choosing an ascetic life in the desert.

In the Jewish world of the first century, purity was paramount. Yet, Jesus deliberately altered the emphasis. For Jesus, compassion, not purity, was uppermost. Throughout His life and ministry and in His teaching He demonstrated a fervent compassion for all people. Purity didn’t seem to matter much with Jesus. He associated with the despised, dined with sinners, told stories about banquet feasts whose guests are good and evil, poor, crippled, blind, and lame (all considered impure). He made the impure, half-breeds, and outcasts the heroes of his stories.

Mark isn’t out of the first chapter when he records Jesus’ reaction to a hopeless and diseased leper:

*“Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man” (Mark 1:41).*

*“And when He . . . saw a great multitude, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” (Mark 6:34)*

The Good Samaritan is commended because “he felt compassion” and cared for the wounded man who was left half-dead. The parable of the prodigal son is more about the character of the father than the repenting of the son. When this rebellious son returned home dirty, defeated and denarius-less, Jesus said, *“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him.”* How does Jesus picture the Father reacting to unclean sinners? He responds with compassion.

Twice Jesus quoted God’s words to the prophet Hosea: *“I desire compassion and not sacrifice” (Matthew 9:13; 12:7).*

For Jesus, compassion defines God. Jesus’ purposefully and specifically recast the wording of the Old Testament law, from:

*“You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2)*

to New Testament grace:

*“Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate” (NEB Luke 6:36).*

The compassion of God was seminal in the life and ministry of Jesus. Compassion rather than purity is paramount.

What does it really mean when Jesus says that the Father “desires compassion” or when the gospel writers say that Jesus was “moved with compassion?” The English word “compassion” means “to bear with” or “to suffer with.” It has been suggested that, given many and varied meanings of the abstract term “love,” perhaps a better and more precise word to describe the “agape” of I Corinthians 13 and other passages is “compassion.” The term most often translated “compassion” is literally the word “bowels,” and thus, the King James unsavory but quite literal translation, “bowels of compassion.” The Greeks believed the seat of deep emotion was in the viscera or gut. The reasons are obvious: deep emotions (rage, anger, pity, compassion, etc.) can upset our stomach and affect digestion.

But Jesus’ understanding of compassion is more than visceral. Jesus and the Gospel writers bring a Hebraic understanding to the term “compassion.” The Hebrew word for “compassion” could also mean “womb.” (The womb, too, is located in the viscera.) The close association between “womb” and “compassion” is obvious. A mother has compassion for the child of her womb. Solomon knew that the real mother would have compassion for baby she carried in her womb (I Kings 3:26).

What then does it really mean for Jesus to say that our Heavenly Father is compassionate? In part, at least, it means that God is “womb-like.” What does it mean when the gospel writers say that Jesus is a man of compassion? It mean that Jesus, too, is “womb-like.”

This meaning gives us a salient and significant insight into the nature of Jesus and the nature of our God (and also the nature of the Christian life—a subject for another time). The implications are incredible. Life begins in the womb of compassion. Life is surrounded, protected, nourished, and



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nurtured in the womb of compassion. From the womb of God's compassion, all life springs forth.

All life begins with God: cosmic life (creation), celestial life (angels), physical life (flora and fauna), human life (Adam's descendents), spiritual life (John 6:57), abundant life (John 10:10) and eternal life (John 11:25). All life is birthed from the womb of our compassionate God. (This raises the matter of the feminine aspects of God's nature. God is not only Father, but God is Mother. But that, too, is the subject of another study—needlessly controversial but controversial nonetheless.) Why did—why does—God even give life? Because He is full of compassion and wants to share life with the creation!

The idea that God is “womb-like” even gives intriguing insight into Jesus' words to Nicodemus:

*“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (John 3:6-7).*

This Pharisee came to Jesus for answers. He has the Law; he needs life. He needs a spiritual birth from the womb of God's compassion. The fertility of the life-giving womb must supplant the sterility of the life-quashing law (2 Corinthians 3:6). He needs a God of love and life. Don't we all!

Your life proceeds from the womb of God. You are His offspring, His daughter or son. You are the product of God's womb, and He is deeply compassionate about you. Amazing!

The womb-like God nurtures and nourishes you like a shepherd cares for his sheep (Psalm 23). He blesses you with all his benefits (Psalm 103). But, more than the Shepherd's care and Lord's benefits, above all else, God is a God of intense, incredible, incessant, womb-like compassion for you. His compassion exceeds our capacity to comprehend it. In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul prays that we be “rooted and grounded in love” so that we,

*“May be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.”*

How expansive is the love of our womb-like God? It is broad enough to encompass all humanity. It is long enough to last throughout eternity. It is deep enough to reach the most defiled sinner. It is high enough to exalt us to heaven. The extent of the love of the womb-like God is beyond human comprehension. It surpasses knowledge:

*“Christ's love is as unknowable as his riches are unsearchable.” (John Stott on Ephesians 3:8, 19)*

We live day in and day out in the nurturing compassion of the womb-like God. Finally, the womb is where life is surrounded and protected. The psalmist wrote:

*“Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Thy hand will lead me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me.” (Psalm 139:7-10)*

God continues to surround us like the womb surrounds the life contained in it. The theologian's learned term for God's all-encompassing presence is “omnipresence.” There is a sense, I suppose, in which we “come into Thy presence” as we sometimes pray. Yet in a greater sense we are never outside of His presence. He is ever womb-like. He forevermore surrounds us and protects us. No matter what you face in life, come what may, know that the compassion of our womb-like God surrounds and protects you.

This Sunday is Easter Sunday, the day the Christian world celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The angels announced to Mary Magdalene and the other women who had come early to the tomb:

*“He is not here; He has risen” (Luke 24:6).*

He is risen indeed!

Jesus Christ is alive! And the “living God,” the womb-like God, continues birthing, sustaining, nurturing, protecting, and surrounding all of life, all of your life.

Why? Why does God bother with life at all? The New Testament offers one answer above all others: He is love. He wants to share His living and love. And, He wants you to know all the fullness of love in life.

Read thoughtfully the words of Wesley's great hymn:

*Love divine, all loves excelling,  
(His love excels all other loves.)  
Joy of heaven, to earth come down;  
Fix in us Thy humble dwelling;  
All Thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love Thou art;  
Visit us with Thy salvation;  
Enter every trembling heart.*

Let your mind be roused and your heart be blessed in knowing that our womb-like God is alive, and He loves you, the child of His womb. Have a joyful Easter!

Amen.

*Grace to you.*