

Wilma was born the 20th of 22 children to a very poor family in what you could only call a shack in the hills of Tennessee. Her birth was premature. She was weak and sickly as a baby. When she was just four, she contracted a combination of double pneumonia and scarlet fever. Somehow she survived this potentially deadly combination, but she was left with a paralyzed left leg. So Wilma had to wear an iron leg brace.

It seemed that all Wilma had going for her as a young child was an encouraging mother. Wilma's mother continually told her that she would be able to do anything that she wanted to do in life. All she needed was faith in God, persistence and courage. Wilma believed her mother.

At the age of nine, she just decided to take off her iron brace one day. The physicians had told Wilma that she would never walk normally, but in time, she developed a rhythmic stride without her brace on.

Then at age 13, Wilma did something that defied everyone's imagination. She showed up for the track and field tryouts. Wilma told the coach she wanted to race. He just shook his head and told her that she could try if she wanted to. For the next four years, Wilma raced in every track and field sprint - and came in last every single time. Her friends all encouraged her to quit - this had to be just too hard on her self-esteem. But Wilma continued on race after race. Finally she came in second to last. And then as a junior in high school, she finally won a race. Wilma never lost another race in her high school career.

When Wilma enrolled at Tennessee State University, her coach saw a very special spirit in her. So Ed Temple began to train Wilma for the Olympic Games.

I still remember those 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. I was just 12 years of age at the time, but the pictures are still vivid to me. I remember this obscure American runner named Wilma Rudolph who was pitted against Jutta Heine - the greatest woman runner of the day. Nobody had ever beaten Jutta. But Wilma Rudolph did in the 100 meter dash. And then she beat her again in the 200 meters for her second gold medal. But Wilma's most astounding feat came in the 400 meter relay. She was pitted against Jutta Heine as the anchor members of their various teams. The race between the Germans and the Americans was close as the 3rd runners raced down the track. But then disaster struck the American team. In her excitement, the 3rd runner on the relay team let go of the baton before Wilma had a firm grasp on it, and the baton fell to the ground. Now in a relay race, dropping the baton usually spells sure defeat. For there is not enough time to make up the distance lost. And the Germans had the woman who had been recognized as best in the world racing down the track. Their exchange had been smooth. But quick as a flash, Wilma

Rudolph reached down and picked that baton off the ground and raced after Heine. As everyone watched incredulously, Wilma caught her opponent and passed her just before crossing the finish line to win her 3rd gold medal.

They had said that she would never walk. But the continued training and encouragement of her mother had given her a foundation for such faith in God and strength of character that Wilma Rudolph was able to beat the best of the best and win 3 gold medals in the Olympics.

Today is Mother's Day. It is a day that we set aside each year to express our appreciation to our mothers for their commitment and dedication to their children. It is also a day to reflect upon the importance of motherhood in the development of a successful person. A text from the Bible that helps us accomplish these goals is found in the last chapter of the prophecy of Isaiah.

Isaiah is a most fascinating book in the Old Testament. It is like a miniature Bible. As the Bible has 66 books in it, so Isaiah has 66 chapters. As the Bible as a whole is divided in 2 parts, so Isaiah has 2 major sections. As the Old Testament has 39 books and the New Testament 27 books, so the 2 parts of Isaiah are the first 39 chapters and then the latter 27 chapters. As the theme of the Old Testament is primarily the law of God and the judgment that comes upon those who disobey God's law, so the theme of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah is the judgment upon those who disobeyed God's law. As the theme of the New Testament is primarily the gospel message of God's grace and the salvation that it brings, so the theme of the last 27 chapters of Isaiah is that of grace and comfort and coming salvation.

We come now to the final chapter of the book of Isaiah. And it is interesting that God chooses to give a final word of comfort to His people by comparing Himself to a mother. Notice what He says as I read God's message to Jerusalem and Israel from Isaiah 66:12-13 for you:

ISA 66:12 For this is what the LORD says:

*"I will extend peace to her like a river,
and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream;
you will nurse and be carried on her arm
and dandled on her knees.*

*ISA 66:13 As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem."*

It is interesting to note the Lord's message of comfort here - especially in light of an ongoing controversy that we are witnessing in our world today. A couple of years ago, I was taking a walk in downtown Chicago after a series of sessions at the Moody's Pastors' Conference when I saw a small crowd

gathered on a street corner and heard someone preaching a sermon from the middle of the group. I thought I would mosey on over so that I could give support to the message if needed. Perhaps there would be someone there who would want to talk about the things of the Lord. But I hadn't listened to the preaching long before I realized that this was not a message that I could support. The basic thesis of the sermon was that God was a woman. This preacher didn't have a clue as to who the God of the Bible really was.

You see, this whole controversy about whether God is a man or woman misses the point of who God is - it shows a lack of understanding into the true nature of God. God is not a human being - male or female. God is infinite in His being - every human being who has ever lived has been finite. God is the creator of all things. Human beings are creatures who have been created. The whole debate about the gender of God is an attempt to pull Him down to our level. The words of the prophet Samuel to King Saul as recorded in 1 Samuel 15:29 are just as true today as they were 3,000 years ago: *29 He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind."*

God is not a human being. He has no gender. He is the creator of the human race. And He created people in his own image and likeness. Both men and women are created in His image according to Genesis 5:1,2. So we would assume that both genders would bear some characteristics of God. And such is certainly the case. God is spoken of in male terms in the Bible - *Like a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him (Ps. 103:13)*. God is also spoken of in female terms in the Bible. The passage that we are studying this morning is an example. Both men and women have been made in the image of God and can, therefore, exhibit divine characteristics in their lives.

Now the key characteristic of God pictured in mothers in Isaiah 66 is the ability to comfort. *As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; the Lord says.* How does a mother comfort her child? Well, the list of the comforting ways of a mother are almost inexhaustible. A mother has a unique knack of knowing her child and just the means of bringing comfort at any given time. But our text mentions 3 specific ways so we will focus on these this morning.

1. First, a mother comforts her child as she provides nourishment for her baby. *you will nurse . . . as a mother comforts her child.*

In His unique wisdom, God created a mother with all of the equipment necessary to provide all of the nourishment that a child needs for the first several years of life. It doesn't matter what the mother's social class is; it doesn't matter what the mother's race is; it doesn't matter what the mother's IQ is; it doesn't matter what the mother's talents or abilities are; God has given to mothers the ability to provide nourishment for their children.

I remember the time when we took our 4th born to the doctor for a checkup. Simeon was about six months old as I recall. He was perhaps our pudgiest as a baby. Some of the people around church had nicknamed him *thunder thighs*. The doctor checked him over and pronounced him to be healthy. But then he added one footnote. *I think we might need to put this child on a diet*, he advised. Sandy and I looked at each other in amazement. For you see, he had never had any other nourishment to that point in his life except for his mother's milk. Even the doctor was surprised when we informed him of this fact. He had just assumed that we had been feeding him lots of cereal and baby food. Needless to say, we didn't put him on a diet - and he has grown up to be a very healthy young man.

Now the ability that God has given to mothers to provide nourishment for their children brings comfort to those children, doesn't it? When a baby gets hungry, that child becomes very irritable in a hurry. But isn't it amazing how quickly the child quiets down when nourishment is given. And there are few more poignant pictures of contentment than a child just after he or she has been nursed. Full of food, very often sleeping, the picture of complete satisfaction.

Just as a mother comforts her child by giving nourishment, so God comforts His people by providing nourishment for them. The Lord Jesus Christ used many symbols to picture His relationship with His people. Two of them were bread and water - and both of these showed the nourishment that He was able to give His people. After feeding the 5,000 men along with many other women and children with just 5 loaves and 2 fish, Jesus said these words: *JN 6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.*

Just as a mother has the ability to provide for all the nourishment that a child needs for the first few years of life, so God has the ability to provide for all the physical and spiritual nourishment that any person needs for the entirety of his or her life. This brings great comfort to us. Do you have a spiritual hunger or thirst? Come to the Lord Jesus Christ - He will satisfy that need for nourishment. Spend time reading God's Word every day. Spend time in prayer with God every day. The nourishment that God can provide will bring great comfort into your life.

2. Second, a mother comforts as she provides protection for her baby. *you will be carried on her arm . . . as a mother comforts her child.*

In 1988, there was a great fire that consumed almost a million acres of the Yellowstone National Park. Many of us remember the news reports of the fire fighters trying in vain to contain it. The National Geographic Magazine did a story on this fire that is known simply as the Great Yellowstone Fire. In the story the testimony of one of the smoke jumpers is told. Smoke jumpers are those firefighters who go in after the

fire has done its damage, when the trees lay as smoldering embers, to finally extinguish the remaining flames and clean up some of the mess. This smoke jumper happened upon a lifeless Mountain Quail sitting on the ground. The body of this bird was charred black - and the firefighter wondered why the bird hadn't flown away to escape the conflagration as so many other animals had. Almost instinctively, the man kicked over his big, black boot tipping the burned bird over. Instantaneously, 6 chicks scampered out from under the Mountain Quail in all directions. The mother bird could have fled the scene saving herself. But she chose rather to stay and sacrifice her own life so that her 6 chicks could be saved.

Such is the protective nature of a mother. A mother carrying her child in her arms pictures this. Carrying a child protects the child from falling down, from running away, from bigger people trampling all around.

The wise king Solomon used this protective nature to sort out the true mother of a disputed child, didn't he? You remember the time when 2 women approached the king, each claiming that a single baby was theirs. The king first ordered the child to be cut in half. He was counting on the true mother's protective nature. And true to her nature, the real mother protested. She would rather give the baby alive to the other woman than see her own child cut in two with the sword. Solomon was able to restore the child to the real mother because of that mother's protective nature.

Now there are times when a mother's protective nature brings some ridicule from her children and even can be somewhat restricting. I cut out a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip sometime ago for my files which illustrates this. Calvin approaches his mother and asks if he can go out with Hobbes and play in the rain. His mother just answers with a curt *NO*. *Why not?* Calvin protests. *Because you'll get soaked*, Calvin's mother continues. *So what's wrong with that?* Calvin pleads his case. Calvin's mother puts down what she is doing, turns to him and explains, *If you go out in the rain and get soaked, you could get pneumonia, run up a terrible hospital bill, linger a few months, and die*. The final frame of the comic shows Calvin and Hobbes looking wistfully out the window at the pouring rain. Calvin says to Hobbes, *I always forget. If you ask mom, you always get a worst-case scenario*. Hobbes responds back, *I had no idea these little showers were so dangerous*.

Well despite our complaining, we can all be thankful for our mother's protective nature. For at the time when a child is most vulnerable, mothers carry their babies in their arms, willing to sacrifice themselves to protect their children.

It is interesting that 5 times in the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament God describes Himself as a mothering hen that opens her wings to shelter her chicks from the dangers surrounding them.

Psalm 91:1-4: ^{PS 91:1} *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*

^{PS 91:2} *I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*

^{PS 91:3} *Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare
and from the deadly pestilence.*

^{PS 91:4} *He will cover you with his feathers,
and under his wings you will find refuge;
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.*

Just before the Lord Jesus Christ delivered his famous Olivet Discourse to his disciples telling both them and us about the signs of His second coming, the Savior used a similar picture:

Matthew 23:37 - ^{MT 23:37} *"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.*

How thankful we are for God's nature to protect His children. For when we are carried in the arms of the omnipotent God, what evil force can harm us?

3. Finally, a mother comforts as she gives joy to her baby. *you will be dandled on her knees. . .As a mother comforts her child.*

Now I must confess to you that I had to look up the word *dandled* in the dictionary as I was preparing this sermon. This is not a word that is a routine part of my vocabulary today. According to Webster, *to dandle is to bounce a child up and down on the knee or in the arms.*

Now although I didn't know I was dandling (I always thought it was just playing horse) I have bounced my boys up and down on my knees a whole lot in my lifetime. And with a young child, it always seems to get the same response - lots of smiles and laughter. Children love to be bounced on the knee. They will play this game for hours until the parent's knees give out for it brings such joy to them.

Just as a mother brings great joy into the life of her child, so the Lord brings great joy into the lives of His children. God delights in bringing joy to His children.

*He does this by giving them all kinds of good gifts to enjoy. *Every good and perfect gift comes from God.*

*He does this by bringing fresh and exciting wrinkles into their lives.

*He does this by surrounding His children at all times with His loving presence, so that even when they go through storms and trials, they still have the assurance that He is with them.

*He does this by guaranteeing each of His children an eternal home in heaven where they might dwell with Him in a state of contentment for all eternity.

*Just as a mother delights in having a joyful child, so the Lord delights in bringing joy into the lives of His children as well.

Do you feel contented and nourished this morning - or do you have a spiritual hunger and thirst inside?

Do you feel safe and secure - or is your life characterized by fear?

Are you joyful - or are you really miserable inside?

Just as a mother comforts her children by giving them nourishment and carrying them in her arms to protect them and bouncing them on her knee to make them joyful, so the Lord desires to comfort His children by providing all that they need for spiritual nourishment, by carrying them in His omnipotent arms, and by bringing joy into their lives.

Jesus once made this offer that stands to this very day: *MT 11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*