

cradled

**CHRIST'S CARE FOR
POSTPARTUM MOMS**

ANNIE VANDERHEIDEN



P U B L I S H I N G

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A Scripture quotation from the New Testament uses the ESV’s alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”).

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For Mabry and Brexham:
I would do it all again in a heartbeat for you.

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INTRODUCTION

cutting the cord

In a dimly lit basement in the middle of the night, I sat—hunched over and hollowed out. A shell of the person I thought I was—like someone had scraped my insides clean for a jack-o'-lantern but forgotten to add any creative carvings or soft glowing lights in their place. *Who am I?* I cried wordlessly in the darkness. *What am I doing?* I chided, fumbling with pinching, plastic parts in attempts to squeeze out minuscule drops, the pulsing drone of the pump relentless as death. *Who are you?* I whispered to the swaddled stranger in my lap. She seemed to meet my gaze with equal bewilderment. *Who are you, and what have you done with my life?*

The fear was stifling, the discouragement deafening. It took only a few hours home from the hospital—a few

questions, tears, and missteps—to send me sailing into a black cavern of hopelessness and grief. Suddenly, I felt like the most inept woman on the planet. *I*—who had watched children for a living and dreamed of nothing else but motherhood from the time I could carry around my first baby doll. *What was happening? How could I fix this? What was wrong with me?* And perhaps the most looming worry of all: *Will this be forever?*

A cord had been cut. And not just between daughter and mother but between “old me” and “new me.” In my bleary-eyed, late-night meltdown, I was starting to realize that there would be no going back. Sure, maybe if I was lucky, I could shimmy back into some prepregnancy jeans or get out of the house to have coffee with friends again . . . but my lifestyle, my daily priorities, my freedoms, and certainly my body were all fundamentally and forever changed. Just like my baby could never squeeze back inside me, I could never truly return to being the woman on the other side of that delivery room. The umbilical link was now severed; the stump needed to be monitored and attended to for a time but then released to shrivel up and fall off, no longer needed. I was being reborn—as a mother.

This transformation didn’t change my essential being, of course; just like my baby was fully human on both ends of the birth canal, so too was I, at the core of my being, still

an image bearer—a whole woman designed to glorify God whoever I am and whatever I do. Nor did my source of sustenance change. As an infant is sustained by the Creator (through a mom’s body) both within the womb and without, so too am I upheld by God in all things, mother or not. But my means of interacting with the world, my capacities and responsibilities, were all nakedly new and blinding. I had been pushed out of a cozy, familiar space to grow up and out now, just like my baby.

In the pages to come, we’ll wrestle through this dichotomy: carrying, on the one hand, a personhood, value, and identity far beyond motherhood but, on the other hand, grappling with its all-consuming demands. When our babies and our own bodies are weak from need and crying out for help simultaneously, how do we live as wise and faithful stewards of both?

Instead of piling more to-dos on already-sagging shoulders or bandaging struggles with shallow platitudes, I want to give you what my own heart needed so desperately in that basement season. *Jesus*.

As we wrestle with the constraints of embodiment, we can reach out for comfort from the One who took on his own frame of dust (Ps. 103:14) and became like us “in every respect” (Heb. 2:17). He knows suffering and need and the dependence of others to the nth degree. He has felt

agonizing hunger, sleepless exhaustion, and bitter loneliness like us. But just as intimate as his *human* understanding of us is his *divine* design for postpartum and for our motherhood as a whole. One with the Father, Jesus knows both the beauties and costs of life-giving and their ultimate redemption in the story of the gospel. So, he is uniquely qualified to enter into these demanding days with us and also lift us above them. As we care for our precious little ones, he cares for *us*.

This book illuminates that care through eight simple snapshots of postpartum life: feeding, changing, sleeping, soothing, washing, nurturing, praying, and anticipating. We'll examine how Jesus speaks into those same areas of our maternal "infancy"—physically, spiritually, and emotionally. My hope is that within the very tasks we're so consumed by right now, we will find new eyes to see his goodness and build a profoundly gospel-shaped theology of postpartum that honors both body and soul.

At the end of each chapter, I offer some questions for deeper reflection. If you're feeling overwhelmed, I recommend just picking one or two to process through when you have some bandwidth. You'll also find a short postpartum prayer summarizing the chapter's main points. These are designed to be bite-size reminders that you can hang on to in the middle of the night or amid another failed feeding session—when your heart is heavy and the fog hangs deep.

They might be helpful to bookmark or screenshot for easy access. You could also consider posting the prayers in a visible location or sharing them with another sister as a prayer request. Even if you can't digest much meaty doctrine in this season, you can still rest in the cradling care of Christ, for he will "tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young" (Isa. 40:11).

Postpartum is a uniquely raw time to be a woman, and I know well the confusion and discouragement that can burrow inside. The cord clamping right now may feel painful or take you completely by surprise, but it's a cut made in love, friend, releasing you into God's greater plans for your life. In his wisdom and grace, he has given you a unique opportunity now to both parent and be parented. And he wants to show you his lovingkindness—not only beyond this "fourth trimester" but right in the middle of it. So, hold on . . . the light is coming, and new life is ahead.



ONE

feeding

Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 2:2–3)

Of all the clips I watched during my first pregnancy, attempting to wrap my brain around the events to come, one particular image stuck fast. In a grainy recording, I saw a minutes-old newborn, still slippery from his descent, with eyes locked shut. A gloved hand gingerly deposited him on his mama's torso, where he proceeded to scoot himself up and over to the nipple, latching almost immediately as if he had trained for such a moment. And then his sliver of a mouth started rhythmically sucking, two button cheeks pulsing in and out. It was amazing to see God's design for human growth and flourishing wired into such a tiny member.

feeding

As the video captured so vividly, searching for food is one of a baby's inaugural acts in this bright and beautiful world. Developmental experts have named it the "rooting reflex"—this innate, involuntary urge to seek out mom's breast. In the hours and days after delivery, we typically see even more of these feeding instincts emerge. When a baby's cheek comes in contact with human touch—a stroke of the finger or a nuzzle into a bare shoulder—they will often open their tiny mouths and start sucking. They become adept at turning their heads toward a food source and doing whatever it takes to get some of that milky goodness in their mouths as soon as possible.

But while many of these reflexes seem to come automatically, feeding a tiny human can feel anything but natural. Most moms I know with multiple children have had at least one difficult or even nightmarish experience with nursing. Supply issues, mastitis, engorgement, cracking and pain, structural issues, or tongue-, lip-, or cheek-ties in the baby—you name it; a whole lot of tender, tired postpartum mamas have experienced it (and maybe you can raise a weak hand high in solidarity right now).

Feeding was one of the care tasks I thought least about in pregnancy, but it quickly consumed every waking thought as soon as my first baby arrived on the scene. I imagined that nursing would be relatively smooth and straightforward (like

the video I'd seen), and if there were any issues, we'd figure them out before long. *Enter my first postpartum experience.* Feeding my daughter was one of the most humbling, challenging, and physically and emotionally demanding tasks I've ever taken on—not to mention the obscene amount of time and tears spent on unsuccessful attempts.

After a lengthy, arduous labor, my depleted body didn't produce milk of any notable quantity for nearly a week. I strained and stressed over every tiny drop, gutted by worry and shame as my daughter's birth weight dipped and formula had to be added in. I spent hours upon hours hooked to a pump, begging the ounces to come and then struggling to syringe-feed milk into a tiny mouth that wouldn't suck.

All the time my daughter spent crunched in the birth canal resulted in a host of structural obstacles, which we spent the next few months addressing through regular chiropractic visits, physical and speech therapy, lactation consultations, and dental interventions. After eight grueling weeks attempting to nurse, in which I developed chronic shoulder tension and tingles from stress and all manner of awkward feeding angles, I finally admitted defeat. Despite the countless hours and interventions, my daughter still wasn't taking to my supply, by breast or bottle, so I packed the pump away for good and turned to investing all her future inheritance in the one type of formula that kept her tiny tummy content.

I'm such a failure. The lies and self-condemnation breathed down my neck again and again. *I can't even feed my own baby.*

The Need to Feed

Why can something so basic—so crucial to our babies' survival and so intrinsic to our physiology as women—be fraught with such challenge? All around us in nature, we see birds and other animals feeding their young with seemingly effortless care. Why can't we—as God's highest creations—do the same? Why does it have to be so hard?

To answer these questions, we must consider the ever-present effects of the fall. God's curse on the ground in Genesis 3 impacts all aspects of our life, work, and child-rearing, including breastfeeding. Bodies that were beautifully designed to sustain life now struggle to do so, for a wide variety of reasons. Babies who should latch and suckle instantaneously now battle both internal and external obstacles. And hearts created to know nothing but love and peace now feel the Enemy's piercing darts of shame and despair—eight to twelve times a day and all the moments in between. The price of humanity's sin touches everything.

We feel that price deeply as we make overwhelming sacrifices of time, personal space, sleep, and money—often with great physical pain and mental anguish as well—to

feed our little ones. We know that their fragile bodies won't thrive without adequate nutrition, so it's up to us as moms to provide for their needs one way or another. Many times, that sustenance will come through our own bodies—our nutrient stores pouring out just the right mix of vitamins and minerals our babies need, our necks and arms aching to find just the right positioning, and our ducts pumping milk out at every hour of the day and night. But even for formula feeders, we are the ones researching brands, sitting in the grocery pickup line for another few tins, boiling water, testing temperatures, portioning powder out for every lengthy trip out of the house, and washing bottle parts—hours upon hours each day. We are tangibly keeping these little people alive at great cost to ourselves.

Some of those costs we endure are physical—our bodies grow weak and depleted as we prioritize our babies' needs over our own. This can have a lasting impact on our hormones, mental health, metabolism, and more if we don't replenish the resources lost through pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. Our frames are beautifully wired to provide nourishment and sustenance to others, but they can't do so endlessly without being refreshed and refilled themselves.

With all the hours I spent trying to feed my daughter, I often neglected to feed myself. I would forget to hydrate unless my mom or husband set a water bottle directly in front

of me and ordered me to drink. I would get so stressed or exhausted after another long nursing battle that I didn't even feel hungry, and the baby weight hanging on only fueled my desire to put off eating. A bag of homemade lactation cookies sweetly provided by a friend grew stale by my nursing station. *I don't have time to eat. And I don't even want to.*

Other postpartum moms might swing the opposite direction. They have no problem feeling hungry or eating, but they might grab what's simply convenient or crave-able, regardless of nutritional value. They may not give much thought to what their bodies truly need for recovery, energy, and strength in these early weeks, and this too can be a way of subtly dishonoring or neglecting their physical needs as new moms.

We often struggle to stay nourished on a spiritual level as well during postpartum. Just as our bodies are being taxed like never before and need a regular intake of quality nutrients to keep up, so our minds and hearts face countless new challenges that require God's life-sustaining Word at the ready. We're feeling confused and overwhelmed, alone and self-condemning, and we desperately need to chew on the truths of the gospel in order to stay grounded and strengthened.

I remember just how hard it felt to open my Bible or utter a few words of prayer in those first weeks. Like putting off a meal I might need, I was too overwhelmed to reach out

to God for help. The constant struggle to keep up with my infant's schedule or battle my own inner demons of postpartum depression and anxiety felt so real and so tangible, while God seemed distant and detached. I knew he was "out there," but I was "down here," stuck in the mire of problems he didn't seem to provide practical solutions to. I muttered a few cries for help here and there and tried to fumble through my Bible study because I knew I "should," but I felt empty inside. My appetite for God grew hollow as the tyranny of the urgent took over my attention.

All these struggles to feed ourselves well in postpartum, physically and spiritually, come very naturally and subconsciously. And it doesn't help matters to heap on shame in response. Postpartum brings very real limits that do impede our abilities to seek out adequate nutrition for both body and soul. Our meals and quiet times get interrupted by cries and dirty diapers. Our recovering bodies don't always give us accurate hunger and thirst cues. Our sleep-deprived brains often lack the energy or capacity to sort through what we could or should consume; we simply do what we can with the time we have. Our heavy eyes have trouble focusing or fall asleep anytime we sit down with God's Word. These battles are real, and we all face them in this season.

Just as breastfeeding difficulties demonstrate the trickle-down effects of the fall, so do our battles with feeding

ourselves. God designed us, beautifully, to live off the daily bread he provides on our plates and in his Word, yet the demands and distractions of this broken world continue to pull us away. Our sinful hearts bend toward denying our creatureliness and attempting to self-sustain. But, friend, here's the good news of the gospel: Jesus draws near to us in tenderness and grace still. He helps us pursue the feeding that's crucial to our survival as moms, moment by moment, as we depend on him.

The Lord's Table

As a human, Jesus knew what it was like to go without nourishment. He experienced seasons of fasting, most notably in his forty-day desert temptation, when Satan tried to manipulate him to turn stones into bread (Matt. 4:3). The parable of the cursed fig tree mentions Jesus's physical hunger too (Matt. 21:18; Mark 11:12). And who can forget his painful cry of "I thirst" on the cross, which was met with only a small sponge's worth of sour wine (John 19:28–29)? Jesus can certainly empathize with us, sister, when the demands of a given day or season leave a hollow pit in our stomachs.

These examples aside, sometimes we can view Jesus as a sort of superhuman who could just go, go, go in life

and ministry without needing to stop for lesser, mundane things like eating or drinking. (After all, we try to do that as moms, don't we? The perfect man must have been the world's best multitasker!) Yet throughout Scripture, we see much the opposite: Jesus intentionally slowing down to attend to his own physical needs for refreshment, as well as others' around him.

Jesus didn't just fast—he also feasted. He attended parties. He ate and drank alongside countless others—so much so that people accused him of being “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). He defended his disciples' right to eat grain on the Sabbath, even when it offended pharisaical tradition (Matt. 12:1–8; Mark 2:23–28; Luke 6:1–5). He celebrated the Last Supper with his friends despite the looming crucifixion. He confirmed his bodily resurrection by eating a piece of fish (Luke 24:41–43). He prepared breakfast on the beach after miraculously filling the disciples' nets (John 21). Feeding played a prominent role in the Son's life and ministry.

It's worth noting, too, not just *that* Jesus ate but *how* he did so. In the repeated accounts of meals with his disciples, the text often tells us they “reclined” or “were reclining at table” (see, for example, Matt. 26:7; Mark 2:15; 14:3, 18; Luke 11:37; John 12:2; see also Luke 7:49; 24:30). This reflects a lack of hurry—a priority of fellowship and nourishment

that rubs against our typical eat-and-run culture. In busy seasons of our lives, eating slowly and lingering around the table are often some of the first things to go, yet we don't see Christ embracing a similar sense of rush.

Even when surrounded by crowds of several thousand plus people, Jesus anticipates and attends to physical needs for refreshment. Rather than shooing the multitudes away to scrounge up some snacks elsewhere, Jesus makes miraculous provision for their hunger. Strikingly, he even instructs them to sit down to eat (Matt. 15:35; Mark 6:39; 8:6; Luke 9:14; John 6:10). This is no mass drive-through line focused on getting everyone in and out as quickly as possible! Jesus doesn't chase efficiency as much as care and intentionality in attending to the crowds' physical needs. He wants them to stay and savor with him—to remember where their food has come from and what it's pointing to.

The feedings with loaves and fishes, as well as many other miracles centered on food throughout Scripture (manna in the wilderness, self-replenishing oil jars, water being changed to wine, and so on), demonstrate Jesus's role in filling our deeper, spiritual hunger. As we are nourished in the here and now, we are reminded that *he* is our true and living Bread from heaven (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22; Luke 22:19; John 6; 1 Cor. 10:17). He is the oil of gladness and healing from above (Ps. 23:5; Isa. 61:1–3; Heb. 1:9; 1 John 2:27). He is

the wine of redemption (Matt. 26:27–28; Mark 14:23–24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Ultimately, all our earthly hungering and thirsting—our struggles to get a bite of food down our throats or a morsel of God’s Word into our souls when we’re so very tired and worn down—will be filled eternally in Christ’s presence. We have a glorious marriage supper of the Lamb awaiting us (Rev. 19), where we will feast with perfected bodies and never resist our creaturely dependence again. Psalm 107 describes God gathering the redeemed from around the world, those who “wandered in desert wastes . . . ; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.” The promise is this: He will bring them to a city to dwell in, “for he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things” (vv. 4–5, 9).

What a glorious hope to await as we spend these long hours feeding the littles we love: Christ is sustaining us now, and he will fill us for all eternity.

Fed by the Father

Jesus, our true and living Bread, shows us by example how to feed well in these fragile postpartum days. While we battle all the interruptions and unpredictability of the newborn stage, we can remember that regular food and drink are vital to our recovery and healing and that they are a gift from

him. We can humbly accept the care of others to help us get the sustenance we need, just as Christ partook of the meals and hospitality of many hosts during his time on earth. His body—the church—is here for such a time as this!

Maybe it's saying yes to a meal train or a parent's offer to cook or asking for help in getting groceries or takeout. Maybe it's having a friend or your husband prep some snacks or set a reminder to check in on your eating and drinking for the day. Maybe it's enlisting the aid of a doctor or nutritionist to ensure you're replenishing necessary nutrients right now. Feeding regularly and well as postpartum moms honors the image of Christ within us and strengthens us for the ministry of motherhood he has called us to. Just as he fueled himself for his daily mission, so must we.

Similarly, we look to Christ for help in our spiritual sustenance. Like our infants, we're predisposed to seek things that fill our hunger. God intended that seeking to lead us directly to him: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . . Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food" (Isa. 55:1–2). But the fall has compromised our spiritual "rooting reflex." Now, we often resist God's good provision and turn to other substitutes instead: social media, entertainment, leisure—even the physical food he intended to point our hearts heavenward.

In seasons like postpartum, when limitations and stressors overwhelm us, these lesser means of filling our souls can feel especially easy and appealing. Jesus graciously calls us back to find our greatest nourishment in God.

When the needs of others were pressing tightly around him, Jesus found ways to withdraw for refreshment from his Father (Matt. 14:13, 23; Mark 1:35; Luke 4:42; 5:16; 6:12). He encouraged his followers to do likewise, specifically at a time when “many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat” (Mark 6:31). When we’re hungry in body and soul like this, we need the same thing we give our infants: a quiet, protected space to focus on feeding. And not only in a physical sense but spiritually as well.

We can chew small bites of God’s Word in so many ways throughout the day and night: playing a Bible app during a feed, posting verse cards by the changing table or crib, singing along with Scripture set to music, listening to a sermon, or keeping our Bible open on the couch arm and reading a little more every time we sit down. We can seize the still, small moments we do get to meditate, pray, or read—a naptime, a few minutes next to the swing or bouncy seat, a quick walk outside while our husband holds the baby. We can bring a verse to mind about God’s provision while we take that moment to sip and savor something refreshing on our tongue.

Jesus doesn't despise even the smallest investments we can make. He promises to abide with those who feed on him and bring our hungry, thirsting hearts lasting satisfaction (Matt. 5:6; John 6:55–57). So eat up, mama—Christ is your food for flourishing, now and for all the days to come.

Reflection Questions

- Am I feeding my body what it needs in this season?
If not, why?
- Is there a time or space most conducive to receiving good nutrition right now? How can I prioritize that (for example, setting a reminder, not multitasking, having someone else hold the baby for a few minutes)?
- Am I feeding my soul what it needs in this season?
If not, why?
- Is there a time or space most conducive to taking in Scripture right now? How can I prioritize that? (Maybe some of the same strategies above apply?)
- How can I look to Jesus in my moments of eating and drinking today? How about as I meditate on his Word?

A Postpartum Prayer for Feeding

Jesus, just as my body and my baby prompt me all day long to feed, remind me of my need to be fed by you, physically and spiritually. Thank you that, like a lactating mother, you will never forget me but always extend compassion and grace in my frailty (Isa. 49:15). You understand—even more than I do—what I tangibly need but also the many obstacles each day to pursuing that. Draw near to me and sustain me through every small morsel I'm able to take in.

Be to me right now water in the wilderness, morning manna, and drink of delight. Satisfy my soul and keep me coming back for the pure milk of the Word when I am spent and hungry. Thank you for your faithfulness in filling me both now and forever, O Lord. I rely on you. In Christ's name, amen.

