

A Brief Theology of Periods: Interactive Session

A Note for Leaders

The average woman has around 400-500 periods in her lifetime. Our menstrual cycle is a reality that shapes our schedule, what we do, and how we feel on any given day of the month. For many of us, periods are annoying and inconvenient. For others, they are utterly debilitating.

It's therefore not surprising that the last few years have seen an increasing number of voices talking about periods in popular culture. Periods are becoming increasingly visible on TV and social media and in movies, books and advertising, and the conversation ties in with bigger questions about the nature of our bodies, gender, pain, shame and a whole lot more.

The Bible speaks into all of life's experiences—even the bloody ones. So we can be confident that God's word has something valuable to say on this most personal and often painful issue. This small group session has been designed to use for a women's small group session, a mentoring session, a women's event, or a teen girl's event. It aims to help women open the Bible and hear God's comfort, challenge and encouragement as they seek to follow Jesus every day of the month.

A fuller explanation of the ideas, themes and passages introduced in this session can be found in the book, *A Brief Theology of Periods (Yes, Really)* by Rachel Jones.

Icebreakers

You could use one or more of the activities to break the ice at the start of your session.

Option 1: True or false quiz

Use this true or false quiz to introduce your group to some fun facts about periods. You could provide pens and paper for people to write down their answers with and give out prizes for the winners. Alternatively, you could designate one side of the room as "true" and the other side of the room as "false", and have people move across the room depending on what they think the answer is.

1. The average woman has 400-500 periods in her lifetime (TRUE)
2. Tampax has been around since the 1930s (TRUE. It was first patented by the doctor Earle Cleveland Haas).
3. The average woman loses 250 millilitres of blood on her period each month. (FALSE. It's more like 60-80mil.)
4. There's a story in the Bible where a woman tells her dad that she's on her period because she doesn't want him to find what she's got hidden in her saddle (TRUE. It's in Genesis 31 v 34-35.)
5. If two women live together, their menstrual cycles can become synced (Sadly, studies have shown that this is FALSE, although lots of people claim anecdotally that this is the case!)
6. In France, one euphemism for being on your period is "*Les Anglais ont débarqué*", meaning, "The English have landed". (TRUE. It's thought to refer to the British Army's distinctive red coats at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815).
7. In the Middle Ages it was believed by some that children with red hair were conceived during menstruation. (TRUE)
8. Apart from humans, the only other mammals to menstruate are camels and hedgehogs. (FALSE. Camels and hedgehogs do not menstruate. That said, menstruation is pretty rare in mammals; it's only known to happen to some primate, bats, the elephant shrew and the spiny mouse.)

Option 2: Period Euphemism Scattergories

A worldwide survey by the menstrual cycle tracking app Clue discovered over 5,000 euphemisms for being on your period. How many can you think of?

- (1) Split the group into teams and give them 2 minutes to write down as many euphemisms as possible for being on your period (e.g. "That time of the month", "Aunt Flo" etc).
- (2) After the time is up, go round the groups, having them read aloud one euphemism at a time. If they're the only group to have thought of it, they get a point. If another group has thought of it, no one gets a point, and everyone crosses it off their list. Let the group as a whole arbitrate on what counts as a "real" euphemism—or perhaps your group will coin a brand-new expression that should become one!

Bible Study: A Brief Theology of Periods

So what does the Bible say about periods? To help us put together a (very!) brief theology of periods, we're going to go on a whistle-stop tour through four key Bible passages.

Note for leaders: You could approach this study in a number of different ways. You could work through all four passages together in small groups, for example. Or you could assign each small group a different passage, and have them report back to the group as a whole about what they've learned.

1. Creation

Begin: First stop: creation. In Genesis 1 we watch as God makes a good world full of life and color: light and dark, earth and sky, land and sea, plants and trees, sun and moon, birds, fish and animals. But the crowning glory of creation comes in verses 26-28: man and woman.

Read Genesis 1 v 26-31.

Ask:

- What is the purpose for which God makes man and woman?
- What does he give them in order to enable them to fulfil that purpose? (see also 2 v 18, 21-24)
- What is God's verdict on this creation design (v 28, 31)?
- Can you see the goodness of being made female? Why/why not?

Summarize: Human beings are made in God's image—it's an extraordinary privilege. These verses have many implications, but for the purposes of this study, focus on remembering just two.

1) Our bodies are good. They are part of who we are.

2) Our bodies come with a purpose.

We've been built with the God-given ability to bring new life into the world—to take part in his creation as we "create" new humans in his image. The New Testament goes on to develop this idea. In Matthew 28 v 19 Jesus charges his followers with the mission to bring new spiritual life into the world—to "reproduce" disciples who are not only in the image of God but are being formed into the likeness of Christ. Even if we never have children biologically, our bodies point to God's good creation design.

2. Curse

Begin: Genesis 1 – 2 portrays a brave new world that was full of promise and potential. But paradise didn't last. The man and woman listened to the serpent's temptation, and they ate the one fruit God had told them not to (Genesis 3 v 1-7). The fall from innocence to guilt happened in barely a moment. And we're still living with the consequences...

Read Genesis 3 v 14-20.

Ask:

- In light of mankind's rebellion, how will the commands to "fill" the earth and "subdue" the earth be made more difficult from now on?
- What's your emotional response to God's words to the woman in verse 16?
- These verses say that the pain of childbearing—and, by extension, of the menstrual cycle—is part of God's deliberate response to sin.
 - o Why is that difficult to process?
 - o If we accept these verses to be true, how might that actually be a good thing?
- What hope do we glimpse in these verses (v 15)?

Summarize: Nothing can be untaintedly beautiful in a world where humans have rebelled against their Creator—that in itself just wouldn't be right. Maybe it makes sense that it is arguably the most beautiful things that have become the most badly broken. But as we grieve all that's gone wrong in the world, we have to admit that we ourselves are part of the problem of sin. That's not to say that there is a direct link between our sin and our suffering (including the severity of our periods, see John 9 v 3), nor that we should just "grin and bear it" when we're in pain (women who are concerned about their periods are strongly encouraged to consult their doctor). But this is to say that, in a general sense, suffering signals to us that the world isn't working. But there is hope: the serpent-crusher promised in Genesis 3 v 15 has come in the person of Jesus, and one day he will return to set all things right.

3. Freedom

Begin: Periods are often regarded as a source of embarrassment. But for women in the Old Testament, it was much more serious: menstruation rendered a woman unclean, and therefore unable to take part in the religious life of Israel (see Leviticus 15 v 25-27). “Unclean” was not a statement on hygiene. It was a ceremonial category which functioned as a picture of a spiritual category which, since the fall, every human finds themselves in: without God’s gracious intervention, we are all unclean and cannot come near him. But the good news is that, in Christ, God has intervened. Keep that Old Testament background in mind as you feel the shame, surprise and joy expressed in this passage of the Gospel of Mark.

Read Mark 5 v 24-34.

Ask:

- What do you think it would have felt like to have been in this woman’s shoes for the past 12 years—both emotionally and physically?
- How is her life changed by her encounter with Jesus?
 - How does Jesus remove her shame and her suffering?
 - In what ways is this a picture of what Jesus came to do more broadly for all of us?
- What strikes you from these verses about Jesus’ character?

Summarize: Jesus came to bring freedom from shame—and one day he’ll bring us freedom from suffering. When we come to Jesus, believing that he can heal our sin and reaching out to him by faith, that’s what he does. He makes us clean by the power of his cross, where he took our spiritual uncleanness upon himself. And he’s so great a Saviour that just a fingertip faith is enough for our sin to be wiped away and for us to be given all that Jesus offers.

4. Hope

Begin: So what hope is there for us in the present, when our bodies cause us pain and sorrow (menstrual-related or otherwise)? While the apostle Paul experienced neither menstruation nor the menopause, he certainly knew pressure, sadness and physical decay.

Read 2 Corinthians 4 v 7-18.

Ask:

- What comfort and hope is there in these verses for a Christian woman for whom menstruation or menopause feels like “death”?
- How does Paul respond to the frustrations presented by the limitations of his body? What would it look like for us to respond to ours in a similar way?
- In what specific ways might we instead be tempted to respond sinfully in this area? (e.g. hormone-induced irritability)
- Look at verse 16. Where do we need to look in order to experience the inward renewal of the Spirit in our fight against sin (on every day of the month)? What does this look like practically?

Summarize: Life in a female body can often feel like life as a jar of clay. But by the power of the Spirit, when we feel weak, God displays his power; when we feel sinful, God pours out his grace. “Therefore we do not lose heart” (v 16). Instead, we fix our eyes on the eternal glory ahead of us (v 17).

Discussion Questions

- What has most struck you from our time in God’s word today? Is there anything we’ve covered that you want to think more about or continue wrestling with?
- Imagine a friend said to you, “I get the impression that God hates women.” How would you use what you’ve read today to counter that idea?
- What are your particular struggles or challenges when it comes to the subject of periods? How does what you’ve read today help with those?
- How can we pray for one another in the light of what we’ve read? What can we praise God for? Take time to do both of those things.

Optional activity

The headline game

- (1) Before the session, search for “periods” and “menstruation” on a newspaper website to find five stories or articles about periods. Print out the headlines, but with some words missing.
- (2) Get your groups to work together to guess what words are missing and how the headlines should read.
- (3) Then get groups to discuss: “When periods are discussed in the media or on social media these days, how are they usually portrayed? What are the typical messages that we’re given about them (and about us)? How does that compare with the Bible’s message?”