

“One of my favorite scenes in the Gospels is when Jesus explains salvation to Nicodemus. Without a hint of awkwardness or hesitation, he employs the metaphor of female reproduction: womb, water, and blood. Yet, in the church today, the female reproductive cycle is still regarded as taboo to speak of, let alone to ponder in relation to our faith. I’m deeply grateful that Rachel Jones has endeavored to dignify what God has architected and to help us consider what we might learn from that design. As the prevailing culture dismantles the categories of male and female before our eyes, Rachel shows us how precious the gift of our female biology is, and all the more for the theology it illustrates.”

Jen Wilkin, Author, *None Like Him* and *Ten Words to Live By*

“Clever, theologically robust, and with real depth, *A Brief Theology of Periods* digs into what it means to be a woman from a fascinating angle. This is, though, not just for women—everyone will find this book illuminating in a profoundly helpful way.”

Linda Allcock, Author, *Deeper Still*

“I admit that I’ve never viewed ‘that time of the month’ with anything but disdain. Therefore I was a bit skeptical of a book addressing periods through the eyes of theology. But Rachel Jones did the impossible. In a humorous and honest (yet tasteful) way, Rachel helps reshape our naturally negative view of periods to one that is shaped by the gospel and God’s good purposes in every aspect of life—yes, even in this.”

Sarah Walton, Author, *Hope When It Hurts*

“This is a fantastic theological reflection on menstruation (yes, really), full of pastoral insight and encouragement. It’s great to have someone address this important subject: even better that Rachel has addressed it so well. I’m sure it will be a blessing to many women—but let me also urge you to read it if you’re a husband, father, brother, pastor or (male) friend. If you want to care well for half your family, half your church and half the world, then this subject should matter to you.”

Tim Chester, Faculty Member, Crosslands Training;
Author, *Enjoying God*

“I cried in my office when I read the opening pages of Rachel’s book. She described a narrative that had dominated my life, though I had stuffed it down deep in my psyche in the file of things you endure without thought. From huddling in misery at a youth sleepover because my cramps were so bad I couldn’t unfurl to my last multi-week periods in my forties that only stopped with a hysterectomy, my cycle dominated my days for thirty years. Rachel reminds us that our periods are not separate from our spiritual life. Our cycles cannot be separated from our person or the Spirit who indwells us. She offers a theology of a woman’s body from Scripture that is thought provoking and practical. Our bodies matter!”

Wendy Alsup, Author, *Companions in Suffering* and
Is the Bible Good for Women?

“Embarrassing. Messy. Uncomfortable. Gross. Periods can be all of these things and more, but this book is none of them. A witty, insightful introduction to the marvels of menstruation and how our periods can point us to God. Yes, really.”

Jennie Pollock, Author, *If Only*

“Surely an essential part of loving others is understanding and empathy. If you’re a man and you desire to love like that, it’s a very short step to seeing that you need to read this book. I’ll now be a little better informed about an area that is so much a part of the lives of the women in my life. As ever, Rachel Jones writes with a wry smile on her face and an amazing ability to apply the Bible to our lives. I loved the combination of humour and theology.”

Rico Tice, Senior Minister, All Souls Langham Place, London;
Author, *Faithful Leaders*

“Most Christians throughout history—regardless of time or culture—have had one oft-neglected thing in common: periods. In this energetic and helpful book, Rachel Jones thinks theologically about the quiet drumbeat of female experience and orients us toward God in the midst of things that might feel painful, shameful, or emotionally charged. Whether periods play a big part in your life or no part at all, you will find biblical wisdom in this book that will help you navigate your own experiences or support those you love in theirs.”

Rebecca McLaughlin, Author, *Confronting Christianity*;
Co-founder, *Vocable Communications*

RACHEL JONES

A BRIEF
THEOLOGY
OF PERIODS
(YES, REALLY)

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*For Catherine and Holly
Thanks for sharing*

Contents

Intro: So Many Reasons	9
Chapter 1: So Much Potential	19
Chapter 2: So Much Pain	35
Chapter 3: So Much Mess	53
Chapter 4: So Many Feelings	73
Chapter 5: So Little Time	89
Outro: Nothing But the Blood	105
Appendix: So Many Questions	111
Bibliography	125
Acknowledgements	127

INTRODUCTION

So Many Reasons

Let me run you through a conversation I've had on numerous occasions since starting out on this project.

Person A [an unsuspecting and well-meaning church member, let's say]: *So, are you writing any books at the moment?*

Me [deliberately vague]: *Well... err... yeah, I guess I am.*

Person A [blissfully unaware of what they're about to walk into]: *Oh great! What's it about?*

Me [with a deep breath and a smile]: *It's about periods.*

Person A: *Like "periods of time" periods?*

Me: *No, periods periods. You know, with blood.*

Person A [stunned]: *Oh...*

[Pause]

Why?!

Why write a Christian book about periods?

So many reasons...

1. They're a part of normal life

Let's start with the obvious: for roughly 50% of the population, for a large section of our lives, periods are a regular reality. 400-500 times in your lifetime—and for 60 days of the year—you're on your period. To a greater or lesser extent, our menstrual cycle shapes our schedule, what we do and how we feel in the course of any given month—even beyond that particular “time of the month”.

For most women, periods are annoying and inconvenient. For some women, they are utterly debilitating (more on that in chapter 2). Either way, if you have periods (or if you don't have periods when you're meant to have periods), then they are a fact of life you cannot avoid.

2. The Bible speaks to all of life

Here's another statement which I hope is just as obvious to you: if you're a Christian, there is not one area of life which can be divorced from your faith. There is not one area that God declares himself uninterested in. If the biggest reality underpinning the universe is that Jesus is Lord and that he died to bring us into an eternal relationship with God, then that should shape how we think about all the *other* realities of our day-to-day existence.

From how we use social media to what we eat, where we work, how much we sleep, who we sleep with and what we wear... all of it, on some level (and to varying degrees) can be thought through *theologically*. That is, it can all be fitted into the big story of what God is doing in the world and how he calls us to live in the world.

The incredible thing about God's word is that it *truly* speaks to all of life. And there are plenty of great books out

there that show you what the Bible says when it comes to social media, work, leisure, sex, beauty or friendship. But periods? Not so much. Yet if Christians are squeamish about this, that's not because the Bible is: it's gritty and real. And it speaks about real life at the sharp end: about pain and endurance, about shame and struggle, about disappointment and loss and love. And it talks *a lot* about blood.

So if periods are part of life, and the Bible speaks to all of life, then God can—indeed, God *wants to*—speak into how we experience them. He wants to affirm us and encourage us and challenge us as we seek to walk with Jesus on every day of the month.

3. Life speaks the gospel to us

It works the other way round too. It's not just that the Bible speaks to us about real life; real life speaks to us about the gospel. "Consider the ravens..." says Jesus: "Consider how the wild flowers grow..." (Luke 12 v 24, 27). *Look around, says Jesus, and see how God...*

And while, ok, he didn't *quite* say, *Consider your periods*, the general principle is that we live in a created world that speaks of its Creator (more on this in chapter 1). So considering our periods is what we're going to do here.

This means periods don't *just* have to be something we endure or put up with. They can also be something positive: something that reminds us of the spiritual realities that underpin our existence, and that presents us with an opportunity to fix our eyes on the Lord Jesus.

I know that probably sounds *really* weird. Yes, it may be that I've been sitting in a room thinking about periods for just a few months too long. But, bear with me. It'll be worth it.

4. The Bible talks about periods

Points 1 to 3 have hopefully persuaded you to read on. But all those reasons were before we even get to pointing out that the Bible does talk about periods specifically.

My personal favourite period mention is a bizarre incident in Genesis 31, where Rachel steals the household gods that belong to her father, Laban, before going on the run with her husband, Jacob. When Laban catches up with the couple, he accuses them of stealing and starts to search their belongings. Rachel is sitting on the place where the idols are hidden, and when Laban searches through the tent she says to him, “Don’t be angry, my lord, that I cannot stand up in your presence; I’m having my period”—with the result that Laban “searched but could not find the household gods” (Genesis 31 v 35). Which is pretty sneaky. But when your husband announces that anyone who’s stolen your dad’s household gods will be put to death, and they’re right there in your camel saddle, what else can you do except sit tight and blame “the way of women” (as the ESV so elegantly translates it)?

But that’s about as fun as it gets for menstruating women in the Bible. You might already know that women on their period were considered unclean in the Old Testament (Leviticus 15, a passage we’ll grapple with in detail in chapter 3) and that having sex while on your period was an absolute no-no (Leviticus 18 v 19).

So it’s no surprise that when people talk about periods in our culture today, if religion gets a mention, it’s almost always in negative terms. Christianity is blamed for perpetuating centuries of taboos around periods. Words like “puritanical” are used as an insult.

So... is Christianity the bad guy here? How do we make sense of what the Bible says about periods when it jars with the way 21st-century Westerners see things?

5. If we don't look to the Bible to shape our thinking, our culture will shape our thinking instead

Let's be honest: your pastor probably won't be preaching about periods anytime soon. But there are plenty of other people who *will*.

The last few years have seen an increasing number of voices talking about periods in our culture. There's been an explosion of books and podcasts on the subject. Periods are becoming increasingly visible on TV and in movies and advertising. In 2019 the "drop of blood" emoji finally made it onto our messaging apps, and a year later periods were even given their own Pantone colour (red, naturally). Social media is full of lively conversations on issues such as period poverty, the tampon tax, free bleeding, environmentally-friendly menstrual-hygiene choices, health inequalities, the gender pain gap, specific conditions such as endometriosis, and what to call the people who have periods—women, menstruators, or something else?

Here's the thing: nothing we read or watch or listen to is ideologically neutral—it's all subtly (or not so subtly) telling us how to think and how to act. Everything comes with its own implicit messages about what's good, what's bad and what's important in life in general.

So if we're not proactive about thinking *Christianly* about a subject, then we'll just end up having our thinking shaped by what the world tells us. And while that's rarely going to be all wrong, it's not going to be all right, either. For Christians,

it's Scripture which is meant to define the good, the bad and the important. We need to learn to think critically about culture—to get equipped to sift truth from error, to identify wisdom amid the folly, and to have all our thinking shaped by God's word.

This is true for any subject. But periods are one that comes knocking for us pretty regularly—both on our screens and, well, in our knickers.

And hey—if you are a pastor, or a husband, dad, or brother in Christ who's reading this because you want to love your sisters, well then, *thank you*. I hope this book will help with that too.

6. A book about periods is a way of thinking about a whole load of other things

I'm imagining that you might have picked up this book out of sheer curiosity. "A Christian book about periods? Now *that's* one I haven't seen before."

But now that I've got you this far, I want to take you on a journey in thinking about a whole lot more than periods. Don't get me wrong: we'll be thinking plenty about that time of the month. But that touches on so many bigger questions too. We'll see how periods springboard us into thinking about what it means to have a body or to experience mortality. We'll ask: what even is a woman anyway? We'll grapple with questions about how God speaks, the purpose of humanity and the meaning of life. We'll think about how we spend our time now and what we'll spend our time doing for eternity.

And all from the starting point of periods.

7. It was a game of publishing brinkmanship that (arguably) went horribly wrong

I know writing a Christian book about periods might make me sound kind of strange. But I'm not that strange really. I'm writing this as someone who has both periods and a penchant for pushing the envelope. When I first floated this idea, I didn't think anyone would take it seriously. Then I wanted to see if I *could* get people to take it seriously. And then they did take it seriously—for all the reasons I've just stated above.

And now, a year or two later, here we all are—my name is on a Christian book about periods, and you're holding it.

So, welcome.

QUEUE UP THE CAVEATS

But before we go any further, there are a few things to acknowledge up front.

First, there is a *huge* variety in the way that we experience periods. This is true on a physical level. Even something as basic as the notion that the average cycle is 28 days masks a great deal of variation—a study by University College London and the Natural Cycles app found that only 13% of women actually have a 28-day cycle. Periods can be more or less regular, more or less lengthy, more or less heavy, more or less painful and more or less emotionally intense. Or maybe, for one of a variety of reasons, you don't have periods at all.

And how we *feel* about our periods will vary so much too, depending on our culture, family background, age, and where we're at in life. Periods are going to mean vastly different things to you if you're 18 and about to leave home, or 28 and trying for a baby, or 48 and single.

But whatever your experience, I'm hoping that you'll find something life-giving and thought-provoking in the pages that follow. Not because I have the insight required to perceive and address all those different situations specifically—I really don't, and I certainly haven't—but because we're simply going to look at what Scripture says. And as I've said, I'm confident that the Bible speaks to all of life for all of us—whatever life looks like right now.

Second, this is not a women's health book. There are lots of fascinating ones out there, several of which I've enjoyed reading and which you might too. While we'll look a bit at the biology, we'll only do that in so far as it helps us with the theology. I am not a doctor, and I'm not here to tell you whether what you experience is normal, or healthy, or whatever. If you are *at all* concerned that something might not be quite right with your menstrual cycle—or if your periods prevent you from doing the normal things you need to do in a day—can I encourage you to *please* talk to a doctor. Please. And while I can't give you a medical consultation, I like to think that by the end of this book you might be a little bit less squeamish and embarrassed—and a little more confident and hopeful—about periods in general, and therefore about seeking help if you've got particular concerns.

Third, some things in this book may be hard to read. In fact, some of it may even offend you. I've tried to take the issues seriously without taking myself too seriously, but we can't get past the fact that what the Bible says about us (and our bodies) isn't always what we want to hear. But if we're ready to hear it anyway—if we're ready to step into the light—then we will find it to be liberating; because, more than anything, I want

to point you to Jesus: the one who came to bring freedom and hope and life in all its fullness (John 10 v 10). In him there is no condemnation—only grace.

Why write a book about periods? Because for every politely baffled church member I've told about this book—for every conversation that's run like the one on page 9—I've met more women whose eyes light up and who say, "Really? I *love* it. I can't wait."

And if that's you, then I'm so glad you're reading. This is going to be fun. At the very least, it'll be more fun than actually having your period—but since that doesn't set the bar very high, I don't think they'll put that on the back of the book. And while reading this won't make the experience of having your period more fun, I am hoping it will make it more positive. Think of what follows as an adventure for the theologically curious. This book is for women who bleed and women who have stopped; it's for you if you hate your period and struggle through every one, and it's for you if you breeze through your period and have never really given them a second thought.

Whoever you are, my aim is that you reach the end of this book celebrating who God has made you and how God has saved you, and the fact that he speaks liberating and positive truth into all of life's experiences—even the bloody ones.