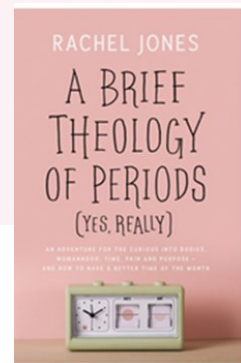




LEADER'S GUIDE

A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF PERIODS BY RACHEL JONES



"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 it a second thought."

RACHEL JONES

THEMES

Physical pain and suffering

Theology

Womanhood

Emotional Well-being

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Fertility

Miscarriage

BOOK SUMMARY

Periods. A taboo topic that has long been a source of embarrassment and is often shrouded in secrecy and silence. The pain, the emotional baggage, the mess; we can sense the brokenness and groaning in our bodies as we endure – month in and out – red splotchy skin from heat packs, hot tempers, low moods and utter fatigue. But what if you were asked to find Jesus amongst it all?

Rachel's book, 'A Brief Theology of Periods', is a refreshing, needed, and deeply intriguing read about what the Bible says about periods. And it's probably a lot more than you think!

Rachel lists a few reasons why a book about periods is necessary;

1. They're a normal part of life; 50% of the population, for a large portion of their lives are on their period. A woman has her period as many as 500-600 times in her life and is often bleeding for 60 days per year on average.
2. The Bible speaks to all of life; we cannot divorce periods from our faith; everything can fit into the big story of what God is doing in the world.
3. Life speaks the gospel to us; periods don't just have to be something we endure, but an opportunity for us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

4. The Bible talks about periods; Leviticus mentions periods multiple times.
5. If we don't look to the Bible to shape our thinking, our culture will shape our thinking instead; there's an abundance of worldly perspectives on periods, yet in Christianity, it's a quiet subject. We should be influenced by how we think about our periods through the lens of the Bible, not the world.
6. A book about periods is a way of thinking about a whole load of other things; periods are a springboard to speak about what a woman is and what it means to have a body (and other things).



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. If you're comfortable, share a little about your period experiences with the group.

TALKING POINTS

Interesting period facts;

- Only 13% of women have a 28-day cycle.
- Periods differ in length, regularity, heaviness, pain and emotional intensity or are non-existent (when they should exist).
- We may feel different about our periods because of many factors, including culture, family background, age and where we're at in life.
- Periods mean different things during different seasons; 18 and leaving home, 28 and trying for a baby, 48 and single.

2

Q. In chapter 1, Rachel describes in detail what happens during the menstrual cycle (p20-23). Many of us don't know much about our periods. What was something new that you learnt?

TALKING POINTS

Rachel's description of the 'Hormonal Cocktail Party';

- Days 1- 6(ish); The first day of our period is considered day 1. During this time, we're not only bleeding, but our ovaries are preparing for release and fertilisation.
- Days 7-13; This is the second part of phase one of the menstrual cycle, known as the "follicular phase". Your follicles release oestrogen, and other follicles stop growing. The dominant follicle continues to mature. Oestrogen causes the womb lining to thicken, produces cervical fluid and helps us feel great and more social.
- Day 14; Ovulation
- Day 15 onwards; Part two of the menstrual cycle (the "luteal phase"). Our body now produces Progesterone, which can support pregnancy if needed. This phase can cause us to be emotional and a little less social than usual.
- Day 20 onwards; Progesterone and oestrogen levels drop off, and prostaglandins arrive, which cues the uterus to shed its lining.

Our menstrual cycles are finely balanced systems featuring hormones that work in harmony. As our hormones rise and fall they stop and start things all without us having to do a thing consciously.

"So your menstrual cycle is more than a mess. It's more than a mystery. It's a part of life in a female body, as an image-bearer who displays the glory of God" (33).

3

Q. In chapter 2, 'So much pain', Rachel reflects on the reality that periods, childbearing, and infertility hurt and provides biblical answers to the questions of 'why'. What surprised you most about her answer?

TALKING POINTS

Many things can go wrong with our menstrual cycle (to name a few);

- Cramps (dysmenorrhoea)
- No periods (amenorrhea)
- Endometriosis
- Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)
- Fibroids
- Cancer
- Premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD)

Our body's way of expressing these issues is often through; pain, short/long or heavy bleeds, too frequent or infrequent periods, infertility and miscarriage. Even a woman who rejoices at being pregnant must endure the pain and hardship of growing, stretching, birthing and breastfeeding a baby – all of which hurts physically and is a rollercoaster emotionally.

The Christian worldview offers no easy answers, but they may be *better* answers;

Genesis 3:16 holds the key to our answer; "I will make your pains very severe, with painful labour you will give birth to children." Here, pain refers to both physical and emotional, and these words are echoed in everything that happens during pregnancy, childbirth, and every menstrual cycle.

- If we don't believe there is a God, there is no rhyme or reason for our pain, nor any hope beyond it.
- "Humanity has twisted the order of creation to try and put ourselves on top, and now everything is bent out of shape. Nothing can be completely good when something so fundamental has gone so completely wrong. Nothing can be untaintedly beautiful in a world where humans have rebelled against their creator... maybe it makes sense that it is arguably the most beautiful things that have become the most badly broken" (41).
- We're right to feel sad and dissatisfied – it's not meant to be this way, but we need to grieve for the right reasons that it is this way; the reason is that sin spoiled God's creation (not that God is cruel and uncaring).
- It's not just Adam and Eve who are responsible; we, too, are culpable. This does not mean there is a direct link between your sin and menstrual issues, but we bear a monthly reminder of the fall in our bodies.

4

Q. "If you're one of God's people, there's an end date for your suffering" (p43). How does this give you hope?

TALKING POINTS

We may feel worn down month after month, hopeless or exhausted, despairing and fed up. But our pain won't last forever;

- Jesus is coming to fix every wrong and restore our bodies.
- God cares so much about our suffering that he came to end the pain by bearing it on the cross.
- Jesus is with us in our suffering; He has entered into our suffering and taken up our sin.
- God can do things with our pain; He can use all of our experiences to make us more like Him.

5

Q. Rachel asks, "should we own our periods and fight for them to be acknowledged, or should we just power through as though they're irrelevant?" (48). Discuss.

TALKING POINTS

Periods make us feel weak;

- In a world where women want to be known as 'strong', it can feel like an insult to be called weak – yet this is what our periods make us.
- There is a paradox around so much of women's rights; we often want to be treated the same as men, but our bodies have different needs than men's.
- Only the Christian worldview can resolve this tension; in the Christian worldview, men and women are complementary, not in competition with each other. God designed the sexes to be different.
- God loves to work through our 'weakness.'
- 'Weakness' does not mean 'worse' (about Peter's comments referring to the 'weaker' sex).

6

Q. In chapter three, 'So Much Mess', Rachel asks, "What's your most embarrassing period story?" (p53). Could you relate to this chapter? Do you have an embarrassing story, or have you felt shame about your period?

TALKING POINTS

Why do we experience shame during our periods?

- Periods have been a long source of embarrassment and shrouded in secrecy and silence.
- Most of us go to great lengths to hide that we're on our periods.
- Cultural taboos around periods lead to serious outcomes for women and girls around the world" (p55).
- A sense of embarrassment prevents women from seeking medical support.
- Shame prevents girls from attending school (or, in some cases, girls drop out of school altogether),
- We feel overall – terrible.

So how do we make sense of Leviticus 15? (women being 'unclean' for a week while menstruating – notes pages 57-60) ;

- We try to ignore it.
- We try to diminish the offensiveness with cultural context.
- We try to reason it through with biblical context.
- Shrug our shoulders and reassure ourselves that these laws don't apply to us now.
- Resign ourselves to put up with it.

We can't explain this away or pretend it doesn't exist. The rest of the scripture reassures us that there is something holy, righteous, lovely and good about God's law. But what is it?

- To be 'unclean' is not a statement about hygiene or being dirty, nor is being 'unclean' sinful per se (a woman on her period is not 'guilty').
- In Leviticus, things (and people) are described as using categories of holy and common, clean and unclean. "Holy" is what God is, as are the things that are set apart for his service. Everything else is 'common'. Common things are either 'clean' or 'unclean'. (p61)
- Things could become holy when set apart for God, but they could also become unclean.

- After a set of rituals, the priest could make himself holy and enter the most holy place in the temple. In contrast, unclean people were not allowed near the tabernacle at all (if they did, they would die or be destroyed).
- In the course of normal life, people became unclean very quickly. While the Gentiles were known as 'unclean', the Israelites who had been set apart needed to be reminded that they too could become 'unclean'; the problem with sin still affected God's people, despite Him setting them apart.
- We can't make ourselves clean and stay clean. We are all in need of God's gracious intervention.
- Periods (while not something to be ashamed of) remind us of the unclean nature of our hearts, actions and intentions (p65).

Left to our own devices, we are all unclean women. Not because we're women or blood flows every month, but because of what flows within our hearts. We have an unclean spiritual condition that only Jesus can fix. "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 the cross, where he took our spiritual uncleanness upon himself" (p69).

7

Q. "There's a wonderful depth and variety to our moods and emotions" (74). Discuss.

TALKING POINTS

Just as God has created a world that changes with the seasons, he's made humans to feel an extraordinary range of emotional experiences;

- Any trivial thing has the capability to change our emotions on any given day, and big things make a big difference, shaping how we feel for weeks, months or even years.
- The hormonal cycle adds another dynamic (as does puberty and menopause), and for many of us, it is incredibly powerful.
- Many women feel confident, assertive and sociable during ovulation.
- Whereas the days leading up to our periods (premenstrual syndrome or PMS) can leave us feeling a little on edge or that the world is falling apart.
- Naturally, how we're feeling affects how we interact with others; it's not uncommon for women to become irritable, snappy and depressed – often wondering why they're feeling this way – until their period arrives a few days later.
- PMS can be a winnable battle for some women. In contrast, others experience such acute symptoms that they fall into the premenstrual dysphoric disorder category, while for others, it's a non-issue.

The world will justify our hormonal-related outbursts and suggest we do more self-care, self-justification and self-acceptance. But the Bible instructs us differently (p77-89);

- Whatever sin or struggle we're dealing with, the place to start is Christ's care, justification and acceptance of us.
- There's a difference between thoughts and feelings; our feelings feed our thoughts, and our thoughts shape our feelings. Although we may have little control over our emotional responses, it is possible to retrain our thoughts.
- Although changing our thought process is not easy, we have the Spirit dwelling in us, and what is impossible for man is possible with God.
- We need to set our hearts and minds on things above (Colossians 3:1-4); 'heart' is less about emotion and more about affections. If Christ is where our life is, then our affections and mind

should follow (p80). This is not easy and takes a conscious effort of the will, a battle – but we have practical tools such as biblical meditation and prayer to help us.

- We must wage war against temptation and not let it overpower us; we cannot use our hormones as an excuse for sin.
- Hormones are real, and they do have a very real effect on us, and it is helpful to acknowledge this, but sin is equally sinful. Repentance should be truly repentant – whether or not we're hormonal (we can't excuse away our sin and live an unrepentant life).

8

Q. How could you better physically and emotionally prepare for PMS and your period?

TALKING POINTS

We can track our cycles and anticipate pressure points in our month;

- Ensuring we're not over-socialising or putting ourselves in stressful social situations during that time, as well as eating and sleeping well.
- Reaching out to others for prayer.
- Remind yourself that it is a victory every time you hold back rash words, anger and frustration.

9

Q. "So for God's people today, this is the main way we bring life into the world: not by bearing children but by making disciples (p95)." Whether we're single, married, desire children, unable to have biological children or have many children. How does knowing the great commission is our primary mission encourage us?

TALKING POINTS

We can't identify our spiritual children through DNA or weigh our spiritual fruit from the good works in our lives. This doesn't mean our work is less valuable than the visible work of a mother (for example) who has raised adult children and the fruit of her efforts is visible in her children.

- We must learn to focus on the unseen things which will be made known in heaven.
- We groan (suffer/endure) forward toward our heavenly bodies

10

Q. In chapter five, 'So Little Time', Rachel speaks about our menstrual cycles, the uterus as a 'timepiece', and the realities of menopause. Have you been through menopause, or have you journeyed alongside someone who has?

TALKING POINTS

If no one has been through menopause, you may consider the following; How does the idea of our bodies containing a 'timepiece' make you feel? (This question could be quite challenging).

- A relief; we cannot wait for our periods to stop.
- Grief; growing old, unmet desire for children, closer to death; "We groan [suffer/endure] forward toward our heavenly bodies."
- Expectant hope – we're closer to our saviour.



Disclaimer: Thanks for supporting this essential ministry impacting the lives of women the world over! We pray that our Heavenly Father blesses both you and the women you lead. This Leader's Guide has been prepared by Blossoming through Books and is protected by copyright law. Please seek express permission from Blossoming through Books before making copies by contacting blossomingthroughbooks@gmail.com. Please share your experience and feedback with us!