

Finding
GOD
in the
SHACK

Seeking truth in a story

of evil and redemption



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Why a Book About *The Shack*?



EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER FELT A GREAT SADNESS, or who knows someone who has, can relate to *The Shack*. This novel is about the Great Sadness—the terrible burden of grief that often accompanies and follows a devastating loss. It may be the death of a loved one. It may be financial ruin. It may be divorce or abandonment. Whatever its cause, the Great Sadness is part of the human condition.

People often ask “Where is God?” when pressed down by the Great Sadness. Where was God when my husband or wife died? Where was God when my brother was killed in a car accident, leaving behind a young family? Where was God when a storm destroyed my town, including my home? Where was God when terrorists attacked and killed so many people?

Probably no question about God disturbs Christians and non-Christians more than this one: How can an all-good, all-powerful God cause or even allow such horrible loss of human life? How can a

God of love allow the departure of someone I love so dearly? Especially if that departure involves pain and suffering, and leaves wreck and ruin in its wake. These questions cause people to wonder about God's character. This is probably why *The Shack* by William P. Young has sold millions of copies, and almost every copy is being read by two or three people. It speaks to these questions—especially the question of God's character—in a powerful way.

The Shack reminds me of the popular television series *Touched by an Angel*. Both delve into some pretty deep waters about God, suffering, evil and free will without mentioning any theologian, Christian church or doctrinal tradition. And in that way *The Shack* too appeals to our postdenominational culture.

While *The Shack* is overtly Christian, those who don't share the Christian faith can and do find it enjoyable. But it seems to be aimed primarily at a Christian audience. And its purpose, beyond spinning an amazingly good yarn, seems to be to correct certain popular notions about God and point readers toward other ideas about God. There can be no doubt that William Young is theologically trained, but he hides most of that well. The reader isn't assaulted by heavy theological jargon but is sweetly seduced into some profound theological thinking.

Before we begin looking at *The Shack* in detail, I'll give a synopsis of the plot. Any who haven't read the book should consider putting this book down and reading *The Shack* first. (It will probably only take a few hours. My wife couldn't put it down until she finished it.)

Spoiler alert! I'm going to give away the ending very soon.

A SYNOPSIS

The hero of the story is God, to be specific, Jesus. But the protagonist

is Mack. And like many people Mack lives with the burden of the Great Sadness. The story begins with an account of Mack's personal history. He was raised in an abusive home, where his father, a very religious man, beat him severely many times. Later he attended seminary for a while but didn't especially relate to what he was taught there. One thing he was taught is that God doesn't speak anymore; he stopped directly communicating with people after the Bible was written. Mack married his sweetheart Nan. They live in Oregon and have five "unusually beautiful kids." The youngest one is Missy, a sweet child especially precious to Mack.

Mack takes his three youngest children on a camping trip in the Oregon wilderness. While Mack and everybody else are struggling with a capsized canoe in the nearby lake, Missy disappears. After frantically searching for Missy, Mack and other campers finally realize, based on some irrefutable evidence, that she has been kidnapped. The authorities never find her body but discover her bloody dress in an old shack near the lake.

The Great Sadness descends on Mack and engulfs him. Apparently he falls into a deep depression during which he is tempted to accuse God and himself for Missy's fate. But one day he finds a note in the family mailbox. It says, "Mackenzie [Mack's first name], It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together." The note is signed "Papa," which is Nan's favorite name for God.

Mack sneaks off to the shack where Missy's bloody dress was found to see if Papa (God) will show up. He's dubious about that possibility and suspects he's the victim of a hoax, but his desperation drives him to try anything. While he's at the shack, God does show up—in the form of a jolly, rather large black woman, whom he dis-

covers is Papa. Then Mack encounters a friendly carpenter, Jesus, and a wispy young female figure called Sarayu, who is obviously the Holy Spirit. These three engage Mack in conversation about his life, Missy's murder and God's role in human events.

The four characters chop wood, explore the beauty of God's creation, cry together, talk about life and death, lie on the dock at night looking up at the starry sky and go for long hikes that lead to some pretty startling places. The bulk of the book narrates Mack's time with God at the shack. It would be easy to suppose this was all a dream. But the book's ending reveals it was not meant to be a dream. We are supposed to believe that God really appeared to Mack as a trinity of three distinct people bound together in a community of perfect love. Papa, Jesus and Sarayu take Mack on a journey to understand why terrible things happen to human beings and what God has to do with it. The point of it all is that God is worthy of trust, and we shouldn't judge God.

After some agonizing but enlightening conversations with God, Mack is allowed to see Missy through a waterfall. The veil between earth and paradise, as it were, is made thin by God so they can see each other, but they can't touch or talk to one another. Mack observes that Missy is happy where she is, and God assures him that even in her darkest hour her thoughts and prayers were mainly for him, his wife and Missy's siblings.

Mack also gets a wider vision of heaven as thousands of souls appear in a meadow at night. They look to Mack like multicolored lights. And he sees angels and other heavenly beings, including a majestic Jesus. During this event (whether vision or reality) Mack encounters his abusive father and they embrace tearfully. Mack forgives his father just as the heavenly Father has forgiven him. God tells

Mack that everyone is already forgiven because of what Jesus did on the cross, but that people have to accept forgiveness for it to benefit them. Apparently, at some point Mack's father accepted God's forgiveness, because he is among the heavenly host.

Finally, God leads Mack on a long hike to find Missy's body. They extract it from a cave where the murderer had put it and take the body back to the shack, where Jesus has finished a beautiful casket. They lay the body carefully in the casket and bury it. By now Mack has come to terms with his daughter's death and is no longer angry at God or himself. The Great Sadness has lifted from his shoulders.

Mack returns from his encounter with God and tells his wife. Nan is surprised but believes him. Together and with a friendly policeman they know, they go to the cave and retrieve Missy's body for proper burial. This raises questions about how real the encounter between God and Mack was supposed to be. If God and Mack had already retrieved Missy's body, why was it back in the cave? That makes Mack's experience sound more like a vision or dream. But apparently we're not supposed to think it was either of these.

THE SHACK RINGS TRUE

I believe *The Shack* is more than a religious novel; it is a true story. It's not true in the sense that I believe the events described actually happened but in that the story basically fits human experience and what the Bible says. Like Jesus' parables, such as the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, *The Shack* is teaching us something. It's supposed to teach that life is tough but we can trust God anyway. It teaches us something about God's character and his relationship with the world of pain and misery. Maybe it's supposed to teach that life is arbitrary, but God is not. Very bad things happen to everyone,

but God is not out to get us, and even in the midst of the very worst pain imaginable he is there with those who suffer.

Why do I think *The Shack* has something important to teach? The book rings true to my own experience. I've experienced a Great Sadness in my life, and I've judged God by demanding to know where he was. God has been good to me anyway and gently led me out of that dark night of the soul—several times! Once he did this by speaking directly to me: I had a conversation with God.

I too was abused by my father. He was a pastor, and everyone thought he was a wonderful man of God. But I knew better. He was an evil man, at least in his later years. He didn't hit me, but he might as well have. He said terrible, demeaning, humiliating things to me, which amounted to rejection. He even asked me to get out of his life and leave him alone when I attempted to intervene to keep him from going to prison. He ended up in prison in spite of all my warnings. And *he blamed me* even though I had nothing to do with his problems. My father's problems and abuse took place off and on over a period of almost twenty-five years, and it led to the total dissolution of my family of birth. I was so torn up that I almost lost faith in God. I began to doubt God's goodness or his involvement in my life. Why was he letting these things happen to me and my family? I struggled especially because my father and I ministered together; for some years I was his assistant pastor. I trusted him implicitly. In some way he represented God to me. And he turned out to be a complete hypocrite and worse.

I'm not comparing my experience with Mack's. I can only imagine what Mack's Great Sadness was like. I suspect only someone who has had a child kidnapped and murdered can know. I have an inkling, though, because when our daughter was four years old we

thought she had been kidnapped, and those ten minutes were the most horrible in my life. I was beside myself. And I knew intuitively and immediately that if she had been kidnapped I'd never forgive myself or enjoy life again.

As it turned out she had wandered out of our apartment-complex courtyard and into the parking lot, where she hid behind a dumpster. She watched as I frantically ran around calling her name. For some reason she was afraid to come out. Back in the courtyard I pounded on doors and begged for help locating her. Finally, feeling hopeless because I was absolutely sure she was gone, I picked up the phone to call the police. Right then a man looking like a gangster biker, the kind of person we would cross the street to not encounter, walked into the courtyard carrying my daughter and asking loudly, "Is this someone's little girl?" I don't remember anything after that. I don't know if I thanked him or not. I kind of blanked out, took her out of his arms and carried her to our apartment.

I thank God for rescuing our daughter and causing her to be found by a kind person. Though that event didn't crush me, I can imagine what Mack experienced.

My father's words and actions, however, did crush me. It broke my spirit. I went through the motions of living. Night after night I had horrible dreams of fear and anger and confusion. Then, one day while I was jogging and praying (yes, I prayed even as I doubted and questioned), God intervened. Out of the blue, without any preparation or warning, God spoke into my life. I knew intuitively it was him. I didn't hear any audible voice, but I didn't have to. I won't go into the details; suffice it to say that the event and its aftermath convinced me that God was still very real and in my life.

So, as I read Mack's story I didn't find it hard to believe. I know

God speaks to people today. And I know what the Great Sadness feels like. And most of the things God said to Mack resonate very much with what I have come to believe based on my reading of Scripture and my experience of God's mercy.

LEARNING TO TRUST GOD

This is what I believe about *The Shack*: the author, William P. Young, or someone close to him experienced a terrible, indescribably evil event. He was seminary trained but that didn't prepare him for what happened. His trust in God was shattered, but he tried desperately to hold on to God, not realizing that God was holding on to him. He tried to hide the Great Sadness, but his wife and a few others could see it. They didn't know what to do for him.

Then God intervened. I don't know exactly how, of course, but something happened to this man that brought him to a new awareness of God's character and God's ways. This renewed his trust in God and assured him that no matter how awful the event behind the Great Sadness was, something good could come of it.

I still don't know what good could possibly come from what happened to my family. Neither does Mack. Both of us simply met God in a new way and found out that God knows what he is doing, so we can trust him. I don't mean that God plans evil or suffering and inflicts them on us. That's not the book's message, nor is it the moral of my life story. Rather, God knows why he allows terrible things to happen, and he is not absent from us when they happen. But God can bring good out of them even though the evil events themselves are not good.

I believe there are such amazing truths in *The Shack* that God might use it to take away our Great Sadness. That's its purpose. The

author surely wrote it with the hope that through it God would heal wounds of distrust and bring some readers back to himself.

THE SHACK AND THE BIBLE

The Shack communicates great truths about God that are both biblical and resonate with experience. But I disagree with some elements of the story. Here and there I quibble with some details that don't seem to fit the book's character. Other elements, though, beg correction. I question some things Young puts in God's mouth, believing that they might lead to heresy if taken to an extreme. I don't think these completely undermine the book, but they need a question mark placed over them. If we bracket them and set them aside, we can benefit from the story as a whole.

The approach I take in this book is to focus on some of *The Shack's* main themes. The question found in the title of each chapter usually offers a springboard into several key topics. And as a theologian, I can't help but use the ideas and events in *The Shack* to zero in on some sound doctrine. I want to explore why some of the controversial ideas in the book are quite correct and why some are not.

By what criteria do I decide whether something God says to Mack in *The Shack* is theologically correct or not? I don't turn to the Bible and pull out individual Bible verses (proof texts) to prove a point. That rarely works, because another person can usually find contradicting proof texts. We can't always discern the clear and unequivocal mind of God by compiling lists of proof texts. I believe the Bible speaks as a whole even when there are seemingly contrary notes. It's like a choir concert. There may be a couple of voices out of tune but the melody is nevertheless clear.

Who is the God of the Bible? I think Jesus is our best clue to God's

identity and character, even though Jesus is not *all* of God. I will often appeal to a panoramic vision of the Bible as my criterion for discernment when examining a particular saying in *The Shack*. I'll argue that in some cases what God says in *The Shack* does not fit with the Bible's vision. At the same time, while *The Shack* never quotes the Bible, it clearly relies on a holistic vision of the God of the Bible and expresses that in God's words to Mack.