

Discussion Guide for **The Shack** by Wm. Paul Young
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William P. Young was born a Canadian and raised among a Stone Age tribe by his missionary parents in the highlands of former New Guinea. He suffered great loss as a child and young adult and now enjoys the "wastefulness of grace" with his family in the Pacific Northwest. Young initially printed just fifteen copies of his book for friends who encouraged him to have it published. Unable to find a publisher, Young published the book himself in 2007; word-of-mouth referrals eventually drove the book to number one on the New York Times trade paperback fiction best-seller list in June 2008. (*From the publisher.*)

Foreword:

*What is Willie's role in the writing of the Foreword?

* What does "You probably wouldn't notice him in a crowd..." tell us about Mack?
About Willie as a friend?

*How do you react to Willie's reflection: "I suppose that since most of our hurts come through relationships so will our healing, and I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside"? (p.11)

*How can the phrase: "I can promise you that the conversations and events are recorded as truthfully as Mack can remember them..." parallel our understanding of the recording of the Bible stories? (p.13)

Chapter 1: A Confluence of Paths

*What are your first impressions of Mack as a person?

*What was your first sense around the note in the mailbox?

Chapter 2: The Gathering Dark

*How do you see Mack as a Dad?

*What do you learn about Mack's faith and relationship with God?

*What is the significance of the legend of the beautiful Indian maid?

*"Well, the Great Spirit makes the princess jump off the cliff and makes Jesus die on the cross. That seems pretty mean to me." says Missy. Mack... wasn't sure how to answer. (p. 31) Your response?

*Does God cause evil?

Thought for consideration: "The author invites us to consider that God is indeed loving and good. God does not plan evil things to happen, but stays close enough to be part of redeeming them into something good. Just as Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, 'You meant it for evil against me, but God redeemed it into good.'" Discuss.

Chapter 3: The Tipping Point

*What do we learn about the potential in building new relationships?

*How does Mack describe Nan's relationship with God?

*How is Mack's and Nan's relationship with God different?

*What potential crisis was averted?

Thought for consideration: Knowing what you know at this point, how do you see the theme of this chapter potentially being part of the theme of this book?

Chapter 4: The Great Sadness

- *How did the loss of Missy affect each member of the family?
- *How is Mack and Nan's relationship?
- *How is Mack feeling about God now?
- *What had Mack learned about God in seminary?
- *"He was sick of God and God's religion." Why? (p.66)
- *What was Mack hungering for?

Thought for consideration: Have you ever felt "stuck" in your life, where what you have been doing is no longer enough? Have you felt this way in your physical, emotional, and spiritual lives? How are they all related?

Chapter 5: Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

- *How would you describe your relationship with God?
- *Does your God talk directly with individual people?
- *What is God's role in the world? What is our role?
- *How is God in the circumstances surrounding Mack going to the shack?
- *Identify the mix of emotions Mack experiences.
- *How was the Great Sadness almost like a friend? (p.79)
- *What is happening on p 80-81 in how Mack is seeing and feeling about his surroundings?
- *How is Young's portrayal of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit helpful or not for you?
- *Is God three different personages? Do we believe in 3 gods?
- *The Bible gives us many pictures of God. Is one aspect of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit more present for you than the Others?

Thought for consideration: "One of the most important things about God being a Trinity is that God is love and love requires a relationship...Papa, Jesus, Sarayu really love one another." "Each member of the Trinity is equal in the divine attributes; each is fully God. The only differences between them are in the ways they relate to one another and the ways they relate to what has been created." How does this help in your understand of the Trinity, or not?

Chapter 6: A Piece of Pie

- *How do we come to know about God?
- *How is Jesus' comment on p.89: "You're not *supposed* to do anything...You're free to do whatever you like." a God-like invitation?
- *What are Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu's character traits?
- *How was the Great Sadness first addressed?
- *How are preconceived images of God dealt with? (p. 93)_____
- *What do we learn about freedom in the conversation between Mack and Papa? (p.94-5)
- *How does Papa explain being *together* in the pain.....with Jesus on the cross and with Mack in Missy's death?
- *How are Jesus' healings explained: as Jesus as human, or Jesus as divine?

Thought for consideration: "You...were created to be loved. So for you to live as if you were unloved is a limitation, not the other way around." (97.) How do pain, depression, doubt, fear, etc, act as limitations?

Chapter 7: God on the Dock

*What's the point around food preparation and eating? Is this trivializing Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu?

*On page 107, Mack discovers Papa's scars. How is that significant?

*How is Sarayu being portrayed? How is she spirit-like? What does her name mean? (p.110)

*How is Jesus taking credit for the beauty of the "velvet black sky"?

Thought for consideration: How can God's name: Elousia. (p.110), relate to "*Being* always transcends appearance" in our human relationships?

Chapter 8: A Breakfast of Champions

*How is Mack sensing he is being well cared for?

*But then how is his dream bringing again the Great Sadness? Where is God now?

*How can the God of wrath and of the O.T. be the same God who is "especially fond" of us?

Papa say "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It is not my purpose to punish it, it is my joy to cure it."

*Why is true relationship without hierarchy?

*Sarayu said, "When you chose independence over relationship, you became a danger to each other...Others became objects to be manipulated...In one form or another this lies behind every struggle for power, every prejudice, every war, and every abuse of relationship." (p.123) Discuss the implications.

*How are Papa and Sarayu answering Mack in the horror of Missy's death? (p.125)

Thought for consideration: What is the meaning behind Papa's comment on p. 127: "We're not justifying it. We are redeeming it."?

Chapter 9: A long Time Ago, In a Garden Far, Far Away

* How do you describe Sarayu's appearance? Her name? (p.130)

* What does "fractal" mean? (p.129)

*If God creates only good, then how do things go bad? (pp.132-136)

*Who declares things good or evil?

*Why was the fruit of the tree of good and evil so deadly?

*How will declaring independence result in evil? (p. 136)

*How does a dependent life free one enough to give up all rights?

Thought for consideration: What does the garden of your soul look like?

Chapter 10: Wade in the Water

*What do you think the reference to tomorrow being "a big day" is all about?

*How are the Disciple Peter and Mack alike?

*In what element of time is Jesus dwelling within us? (p.141)

*How does this impact our fears and the described meaning of evil?

*Discuss "Genuine relationships are marked by submission..." (p.145)

*Do you agree: men find fulfillment in achievement and women find it in relationships?

*What does this tell you about God's purpose in creating man and woman? (pp.146-8)

*How does submission work in a relationship? How is it not an abusive relationship?

Thought for consideration: This is the key: "I came to give you life, real life, my life. We will come and live our life inside you, so that you begin to see with our eyes, hear with our ears, and touch with our

hands, and think like we do.” (p.149) “Is this our purpose in being? How would it change life if we lived believing this is true?”

Chapter 11: Here Come Da Judge

* How do you describe this latest part of Mack’s journey? What is the purpose of the door, the dark, the twisted tunnel, finally the light assisting him, the comfortable-looking chair, and the beauty in the woman?

*Who is the character with Mack?

*What was her point in asking Mack which of his children he loved the most? (p.154)

*What is the significance of Sophia acknowledging Mack’s love for his children to be “a wonderful and real love”? (p.155)

*Why did Mack not truly believe God is good? What area in your life causes you to wonder if God is truly good to you? (p.156)

*What is the judgment issue all about? What is her point?

*What does trusting in God have to do with Mack’s anger? Did God fail Missy? Mack? You, perhaps? (p.161)

*How does being in the judgment seat bring new awareness to Mack?

*How is Mack’s love for his children sound like Jesus’ love? (p.163)

*Why didn’t / why doesn’t Papa stop horror?

*What is the suggested better way to deal with pain? (p.165)

*What suddenly broke through Mack’s pain? What was soothing?

*Is there any truth in this?

Thought for consideration: How do you explain: “...judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.”?

Chapter 12: In the Belly of the Beats

*How had the Great Sadness become Mack’s identity? How is that possible?

*How did Mack find permission to move on?

*What would it take for you to move on from any bitterness, anger, unresolved loss?

*What do we know about the identity of the woman in the cavern?

*Could we reconnect with her if we wanted to?

*What are your beliefs about loved ones in heaven? Do they know about your life now? Do they influence the way you think / feel?

* What was the one last thing bothering Mack about Missy and how was his question answered?

*Why was crying a relief this time?

*What was the lesson behind Mack’s experience in the the water this time?

*How we do rid ourselves of the things “that go bump in the night”?

*Why often do our monsters seems so huge?

*Describe how Mack has come to love Jesus. (p.176)

*How does the “timing of grace” work? Has it ever worked that way for you?

*What has been your experience with Jesus’ bride, the Church?

*How does Jesus feel about religion? How would you respond to Jesus’ comments?

* What is Jesus asking of you, all of us?

Thought for consideration: Jesus said to Mack he was “learning to live loved”. How could this advice apply to you and your life?

Chapter 13: A Meeting of Hearts

*What was God's message to Mack in saying: "I don't even want your sorrow for it, Mack"?

*If God says that She can work "incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies", what does She say about the cause of tragedies? (p.185)

*What does God know about folks who call themselves "screw ups"?

* How are lies like "a little fortress"?

* God said to Mack: "...my life inside of you will appropriate risk and uncertainty to transform you by your own choices..." How does this work? (p. 189)

*How does Papa respond to Mack's question of why God doesn't stop evil, like Missy's death? (p.190)

* What does Papa mean when She says that "we have put all our human eggs in one basket"? (p.192)

Thought for consideration: "When they (the religious folk) want people to do what they think is right, they need a stern God. When they need forgiveness, they run to Jesus." Have you had different thoughts about God than Jesus? What about the God of the O.T.?(p. 186)

Chapter 14: Verbs and Other Freedoms

*What did Mack learn about Papa's presence? How will Mack be able to hear God? (p.195)

*Discuss: "Paradigms power perception and perceptions power emotions. (p.197)

*Do you agree with Sarayu when she says, "The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules"? (p.197-8)

* How is God in everything, even art, music, silence?

*What do you read about The 3's relationship? What does food have to do with it? Is this truth or contrived?

*What is said about the 10 Commandments? (p.202-3)

*How did Jesus fulfill the law?

*Why is a verb alive and a noun dead?

*What is the difference between expectations and expectancy? (p.206)

Thought for consideration: How is God and Jesus living in us enough and all we need? Where is the Holy Spirit?

Chapter 15: A Festival of Friends

*Discuss the quote from Frederick Buechner on p. 209 :

"You can kiss your family and friends goo-bye and put miles between you, but at the same time you carry them with you in your heart, your mind, your stomach, because you do not just live in a world but a world lives in you."

*Describe the setting where Mack finds himself.

*Have you ever experienced the heavens declaring the glory of God?

*Explain why Sarayu is hard to look at. Can you relate?

*Why are all the color patterns of light unique?

*What is the point of Mack meeting his father now?

*What do you know about the uniqueness of a loving relationship?

* What is the "song of reconciliation" all about? (p.215)

*What does forgiveness feel like?

Thought for consideration: Do you truly believe that God is "especially fond of you"? How do you know?

*Take time to be silent with you answer. After 5 minutes, invite anyone wishing to share, to do so. Respect those who hold their thoughts privately.

Chapter 16: A Morning of Sorrows

- *Why did Papa now appear to Mack as a man? What does this tell us about God?
 - *How did Mack's reconciliation with his dad affect Mack's relationship with God as Father?
 - *How can we reconcile with someone who has died?
 - *Any reaction to these numerous instances when Mack doesn't know where he is going next, or with Whom, yet he follows along?
 - *How is pain sometimes necessary on the path to healing?
 - *What is "release" and "redeem" all about? (p.224)
 - *How does forgiveness bring us freedom?
 - *Does forgiveness necessarily mean relationship?
 - *What are the necessary stages of forgiveness for a relationship? (p.225)
 - *Does forgiveness mean forgetting, excusing, letting off scot free, being anger free? (p.226-7)
 - *How is Papa explaining forgiveness taking time to complete?
 - *How did Papa explain the wonder of tears? (p.228)
 - *Where did the path lead?
 - *What was the significance of the process of preparing Missy's body to be carried away from the cave? The flowers? Papa handing over her body to Mack? Mack's prayer: "I forgive you....I forgive you."
 - *What was the significance of Papa putting the rock back over the entrance? How is this like the Easter message?
- Thought for consideration: Papa's statement: "There was no way to create freedom without a cost..." Is there any truth to that in your life today?

Chapter 17: Choices of the Heart

- *Describe the holiness of Jesus' masterpiece.
- *What parts of Missy's burial service were most meaningful for you.
- *What helped Mack to make his hard decision about going or staying?
- How does Sarayu help in Kate's struggle?
- * Why did Mack leave his little tin box behind? Where do you keep your treasures?
- *Ultimately what did Mack want? How about you?
- *How is it that Mack left with less than he came with? How is it that Mack left with more than he came with?
- *How did Mack feel waking to the "un-real world"?

Thought for consideration: Sarayu dropped a special tear into the center of Missy's burial plot. She said, "It is a tree of life, growing in the garden of your heart." (p.234) How might this be a comfort to someone mourning?

Chapter 18: Outbound Ripples:

- *What happened to Mack?
- *How did Nan respond to Mack's story?
- *What would your prayer for those who struggle with injustice sound like?
- *"If anything matters then everything matters". How does this apply to your life? (p.248)

Ongoing Thoughts for consideration:

- *The story of the Shack is fictional, are the characters of Papa, Sarayu, Jesus real?

*Is God in charge but not in control?

*Where is God in senseless and innocent suffering?

*Does God forgive everyone unconditionally?

*What does God want with us?

*Will child abusers be in heaven?

*Has The Shack affected you in any particular way? Describe.

Other Resources:

Challies, Tim, The Shack: Unauthorized Theological Critique, Nimble Books, LLC, Ann Arbor, MI, 2007.

Olson, Roger E., Finding God in The Shack, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2009.

Rausser, Randal, Finding God in The Shack, Paternoster Publishing, Colorado Springs, CO, 2009.

Young, WM. Paul, The Shack, Windblown Media, Newbury Park, CA, 2007.

In addition: a variety of websites.