

The Shack Discussion Group

St. Mark's United Methodist Church
Daleville, VA

"A special note to On-Line users"

We are delighted to make use the Web to extend the discussion we are having at St. Mark's, each of the Wednesdays until late May, as we journey through the Scriptures and reflect on the themes of William Paul Young's novel The Shack. Below you will find the weekly study questions we use to start our discussion, and also the Scriptures we use in class to illumine our enquiry in the nature of the Trinity, the crisis of suffering, and the related themes of guilt, loss, forgiveness and redemption.

This study guide will be updated weekly on Thursday mornings. While you may not be able to come be with us on Wednesdays (at either 10 AM or 6:45 PM), please do not hesitate to contribute your perspective to our conversation or to talk with me about your reflections on The Shack or our study; you may write to me at pastor@stmarksmethodist.com - I'd love to hear from you. I pray that you will both enjoy and benefit spiritually from being part of our conversation.

*Rev. Dave Rochford, Pastor
St. Mark's UMC*

The Shack Discussion Group

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Wednesdays, 10 a.m. and 6:45 p.m.*

- April 22 Introduction – Our Method and Hopes for our Discussions
- April 29 The Nature of the Trinity: *what is God really like, and how do we know?*
- May 6 Relationship(s): *What is our Created Purpose, and what happens when we choose another way?*
- May 13 Power, Authority and Submission: *how does God challenge the way we relate to each other?*
- May 20 The Crisis of Pain: *how can a Good God allow Suffering?*
- May 27 Judgment and Forgiveness: *from exactly what does Jesus set us free, and how are we meant to live free?*

*Remember: you are welcome to come to either the AM or PM study on any given Wednesday; both groups will deal with the same theological issues and biblical texts each week. Also - you can bring a friend at any time!

992-3030
pastor@stmarksmethodist.com

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Guiding Questions
(for Wednesday, April 29)

Session II: The Nature of the Trinity:

what is God really like, and how do we know?

(See especially The Shack Chapters 5, 6 and 7)

Alert! There are two editions of the Shack floating around, it seems. The page numbers referenced below correspond to the edition made available by St. Mark's - the edition most folks have, which came with a brown sticker on the front cover. IF your copy is an earlier edition and does not seem to "match up" with the references below, subtract two pages, i.e., if the guide references p. 90, that will correspond exactly to your p. 88.

- I.
 - a) When we first meet Mack, what is his concept of God, and how is it shaping his life? Why might Mack feel the way he does about God?
 - b) How do you imagine God? What in your life has shaped your understanding of God?

- II.
 - a) How does William Young personify God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Is his choice to use women consistent or inconsistent w/images of God in the Bible?
 - b) How did you react to the way that the Author personified the three Persons of God? How might you have done this differently?

- III. a) On p. 103, what does Young say is the meaning of a God Who is Three in One? Do you agree with his claim? Does it change how you view the Triune God?
- b) Why do you think Mack is “more comfortable” with Jesus on pp. 112 and 166? If Jesus appeared to you, would he seem more real, or somehow more limited?

- IV. a) Mack struggles to believe that ‘Papa’ is really *good*. What is the cause of that struggle? What is evidence of it? How does Mack’s eventual acceptance of Papa’s goodness transform his life?
- b) If you really believed that God is fundamentally, wholly good, and desires good for you, how might your life be changed?

Finally, what Bible texts do you think we should read and reflect on together when we meet to consider the nature of the Trinity?

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Session II - The Nature of the Trinity: *what is God really like, and how do we know?*

Breakout Groups:

Consider this quote from early 20th-century Christian author Oswald Chambers: *“My vision of God is dependent upon the condition of my character. My character determines whether or not truth can even be revealed to me.”*

What does this mean? Would you agree with Chambers? Are we doomed to perceive God through our own varying little lenses, or can we find God's self-revelation in other ways?

After discussing this, turn to the following scriptures and examine them together. (It does not matter if you get through all of them, and you may skip and choose as you prefer.)

Genesis 1:26-27
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 1:1-5, 10-14
John 17:20-26

What do these texts say to us about the nature of God? About the Trinity?

What do they imply regarding the relationship of us humans with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?

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Guiding Questions

(for Wednesday, May 6)

Session II: **Relationships:**

what is our created purpose, and what happens when we choose another way?

(See especially The Shack Chapters 8 and 10)

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- I.
 - a) How would you describe the relationships that form Mack's family, prior to his experience at the shack? What is impeding, or negatively influencing, those relationships?
 - b) Consider the relationships that make up your life - what about them is authentic, and what is distant? What is causing disharmony?

- II.
 - a) How is Mack's own painful relationship to his father shaping his life, influencing his grief and his relationship to God?
 - b) Do you think a person's view of her or his own father could influence her or his view of God? Has that been true for your life? If so, how?

- III. a) On p. 126, Young has Papa say that humankind was made in God's image to be "the crowning glory of Creation," "free to simply be in relationship with God and one another." What is impeding our fulfillment of that created purpose?
- b) On p. 94 Papa says that "Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship." What, in your opinion, does that mean?
- IV. a) On p.99, Papa says that we were created to be loved, and that to live as if we are unloved is not *freedom*, but *limitation*. What impact has Mack's demand for independence had on his life? What changes in his life, and in the relationships which comprise it, does his experience at the shack bring about?
- b) Regarding the relationships that make up your life, what changes would surrender to God bring about? What would be the cost to you, to God, of those changes?

Finally, what Bible texts do you think we should read and reflect on together when we meet to consider how God created us to be in relationship with Father, Son and Spirit, and with one another?

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Session III - Relationship(s): *What is our Created Purpose, and what happens when we choose another way?*

Breakout Groups:

Why did God create humankind? The question has engaged the minds of professional theologians and ordinary people of faith (“amateur theologians!”) since our beginning.

Why do *you* think God made us? What are the implications of your belief in this matter with respect to your understanding of God's nature? Does God's making humankind suggest to you that our Creator is wise or unwise, loving or aloof, risk-taking or reckless?

After discussing this, turn to the following scriptures and examine them together. (It does not matter if you get through all of them; you may skip and choose as you prefer.)

Genesis 3:1-21
Genesis 4:1-16
Luke 10:25-37
John 15:9-17
Revelation 22:1-5

What do these texts say to us about the reason(s) God created us? What went wrong? How has this affected our relationships with one another?

What do they imply regarding how God has “purposed” to redeem all Creation?

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Guiding Questions

(for Wednesday, May 13)

Session III: Power, Authority and Submission:

how does God challenge the way we relate to each other?

(See especially The Shack Chapters 8 and 10)

Note: if your copy of The Shack does not seem to “match up” with the page numbers referenced below, try subtracting two pages, i.e., if the guide references p. 90, that may correspond to your edition’s p. 88.

- I.
 - a) Mack seems to want to figure out which of the three Persons of the Trinity is “in charge” (Ch. 8). Why would he want to know such a thing? How does Young suggest Papa, Jesus and Sarayu interrelate?
 - b) In terms of your view of God, what does it mean to you that love does not force its own will, and that God has “submitted to us” by sending Jesus to us?
- II.
 - a) According to Young, (Ch. 8) what impact do laws, structure and hierarchy have on relationships? Do you agree with his view? Why, or why not?
 - c) In Ch. 9, Young makes a very peculiar claim about the notion of “rights.” He suggests that those who love God need to “live free enough to give up” their claim upon rights. What do you make of this claim? Would you agree?

- III. a) On p. 147 (Ch. 10), Jesus says that “genuine relationships are marked by love and submission.” He goes on, in the following pages, to diagnose the reason that men and women, respectively, have “turned” away from God in order to find a (false) sense of identity and value. What do you think of Young’s characterization here?
- b) Would you agree that God created women and men to be “face-to-face equals?” If so, how do you see this expressed biblically, practically? What about our relationships with one another inhibits radical equality, even in our differences?
- IV. a) In a crucial paragraph on p.151, Jesus says that “my life was not meant to be an example to copy” - a statement that would seem to be at odds with “*What Would Jesus Do?*” ethical thinking. What does Young mean to say here, by asserting that following Jesus *really* means “for our independence to be killed?”
- c) What ways have you found to “die daily” in order to receive the life of Christ? Is this idea a strange one to you? Would you allow your independence to die, if it meant living more fully in Christ? If so, what might this look like, in the context of your life?

Finally, what Bible texts do you think we should read and reflect on together when we meet to consider how our thirst for power and subsequent turning from God has afflicted the way we relate to each other?

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Session IV - Power, Authority and Submission:

How does God challenge the way we relate to each other?

Breakout Groups:

Some have observed that it is much easier to *admire* Jesus than it is to *follow* him.

What, in your view, does it mean to follow Jesus? Consider what it meant for those who tried to follow him during his earthly ministry. Should it be easier now? Should we expect the outcome to be different for those who attempt to follow him today, vs. the outcomes for his apostles?

After discussing this a bit, turn to the following scriptures and examine them together. (It does not matter if you get through all of them; you may skip and choose as you prefer.)

Matthew 18:1-5
Mark 8:31-38, and 9:1
Philippians 2:1-11
James 4:1-8a

What do these texts say to us about how Jesus understands and wields power and authority? What implications does his example have for leadership, politics and relationships among those who follow him?

And...how are we doing?

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Guiding Questions

(for Wednesday, May 20)

Session IV: **The Crisis of Pain** -

how can a good God allow the innocent to suffer?

(See especially The Shack Chapters 9 and 10)

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- I.
 - a) What impact has the pain of Missy’s death had upon Mack? Specifically, how has his anguish affected his relationships with family, with others, and with God (or his view of God)?
 - b) In terms of your own life, what effect have seasons of grief or suffering had on your relationships, and on your understanding of God?

- II.
 - a) On pp.135-38 (Ch. 9), Sarayu explains to Mack the consequences of a human tendency to decide what is good and what is evil on an individual basis. Why, according to Sarayu, do we do this? What are the outcomes? And what, specifically, is our alternative to doing so?
 - d) How did you react the last time someone threatened “your good” (per p.136)? Has something that once seemed evil to you ever turned out to be “good” over time?

- III. a) On p.187 (Ch. 13), Papa says “*just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies.*” Why do you think we tend to locate responsibility for accident or tragedy with God? Is that ever warranted?
- b) Can you think of a time when you heard another believer suggest that God had “purposed” or caused a tragedy or death? Have you ever considered that this might be so? In what way does Young’s portrayal of Papa challenge such a perspective? What do the Scriptures suggest about this matter?
- IV. a) For Mack, a pivotal and painful moment comes on p.224 (Ch. 16), when Papa reveals that she/he could have prevented what happened to Missy, but did not. Why did God allow Missy’s death to occur?
- b) Do you find Young’s case for God’s allowing human tragedy and suffering to be convincing? Why - or why not?

Finally, what Bible texts do you think we should read and reflect on together when we meet to consider the painful reality of human suffering, and our concurrent belief in a loving, powerful God?

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Session V - The Crisis of Pain:

How can a good God allow the innocent to suffer?

Breakout Groups:

Based on the “relative morality” of prison, claims the author of The Shack, even hardened criminals consider pain inflicted on children to be utterly unacceptable and worthy of swift retribution.

What impact, in your view, does “unmerited suffering”, or the pain inflicted upon the innocent, have on those who seek to trust God? Has this crisis influenced your own view of God?

After discussing this a bit, turn to the following scriptures and examine them together. (It does not matter if you get through all of them; you may skip and choose as you prefer.)

Luke 13:1-5

John 9:1-7

Romans 8:28

2 Corinthians 4:7-11

What do these texts say to us about how Christians are to face the pain of unmerited suffering? What are the implications of the Cross for those who seek to follow Jesus, as we confront evil and its consequences in the world, and in our lives?

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Guiding Questions
(for Wednesday, May 27)

Final Session (VI): **Judgment and Forgiveness:**
*from exactly what does Jesus set us free, and how
are we meant to live free?*

(See especially The Shack Chapters 11 and 16)

Note: if your copy of The Shack does not seem to “match up” with the page numbers referenced below, try subtracting two pages, i.e., if the guide references p.90, that may correspond to your edition’s p.88.

- I. a) When Mack faces “Sophia” in the cave (Ch. 11), exactly how does she challenge his judgmental attitude? Of whom has Mack been judgmental? How does God’s Wisdom begin to help Mack to find another way of seeing and living?
- b) In your own experience, what actions of others have been the hardest to forgive? What effect has your withholding forgiveness had upon you?
- II. a) According to Sophia (p. 166), the Cross means that “*mercy triumphs over justice.*” Why is this good news? On p. 171, Sophia goes on to say: “*Judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.*” What might this mean?
- b) How is Young’s interpretation of God’s nature different from your own, especially as regards judgment?

- III. a) According to Young, what is the purpose of the Law (p. 204-05)? Why hasn't Jesus "saved everybody" by dying for them (pp. 194, 227)? Exactly what *has* Christ's death accomplished?
- b) Do you ever feel unworthy of God's love or attention? What does it mean that Jesus has *already* atoned for our own sins, each of us?
- IV. a) In what is arguably the climax of the novel (pp. 226-229), Papa leads Mack to confront his own consuming hatred of the man who murdered Missy. What does Papa reveal to Mack about what *forgiveness* is? Equally as important, what does Papa say that forgiveness is *not*?
- b) At the conclusion of the novel, Willie tells us that Mack has requested to speak to Missy's killer, and is still awaiting permission to do so. As specifically as you can, try to imagine what Mack would say to the man. Can you imagine yourself ever doing the same to a person who has in the past deeply wronged you? If not, what does it mean that only with God is "true forgiveness" ever possible?

Finally, what Bible texts do you think we should read and reflect on together, when we meet to consider what it means that Jesus has purposed to *set us free* in order to *live free*?

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Session VI - Judgment and Forgiveness:

*From exactly what does Jesus set us free,
and how are we meant to live free?*

Breakout Groups:

Take a look at this true-to-life “case study” - a elderly woman in a small town is widely regarded as a devout and peace-filled follower of Jesus, but inwardly she feels deep pain and anxiety. Nearly every week, she sees passing by the man who, thirty years before, sexually assaulted her granddaughter. Sometimes he even gives her a wave. The man was never held to account for what he did. The granddaughter is now in prison for drug offenses; the woman wonders what life would have been like for the child if she had not been abused.

Though she has voiced it to few, the woman has struggled to find it in her heart to forgive the abuser, but it seems she cannot “forgive and forget.” She is old now, and fears that when she meets Jesus, her inability to forgive the man will mean that her many sins will go unforgiven by her Lord.

What would you say to this woman, were she to confide in you regarding her inner turmoil? Has The Shack offered any potential insights on which you might draw?

After discussing this a bit, turn to the following scriptures and examine them together. (It does not matter if you get through all of them; you may skip and choose as you prefer.)

Matthew 18:15-18; 21-35

Luke 6:27-31, 37-42

Luke 7:40-48

Romans 3:21-26

(OVER)

What do these texts say to us about how Christians are to “embody” the forgiveness that Jesus preached and practiced? What does distinctively *Christian* forgiveness entail (what is the source of it, whom does it involve, what does it mean in practical terms, and what *doesn't* it mean?)

Note: thank you for being with us for our study of The Shack. Whether you've been with us in class or on-line, as so many have, it has been a blessing to make this journey with you. I hope you in turn have been blessed by a deeper appreciation for our Father's desire to be in relationship with each of us, and all of us.

Peace,

Rev. Dave Rochford

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