

REFLECTIONS ON W PAUL YOUNG'S *THE SHACK*

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Part One: Suffering

I started reading *The Shack* after hearing about it from members of my small group. Some were confused, others comforted but with a gushing recommendation from Eugene Peterson on the front cover, I was at least intrigued! Although others have sought to give a critique of *The Shack* and done an admirable job, in order to clarify my own thoughts and perhaps to be of help to others, I have chosen to write two reflections on a book that is at least an enthralling story.

THE STORY

The narrative of *The Shack* follows Mack who has come through an abusive childhood to be settled down with a wife he adores and five children. His wife has a particularly intimate relationship with God, calling him Papa, but Mack finds this quite odd. On a camping trip, while Mack is saving his son from drowning, his youngest daughter Missy is kidnapped and later brutally murdered. Although her body cannot be found, her bloodstained dress turns up at a remote, abandoned shack. The shock and devastation to the family is great and they are still coming to terms with the tragedy three and a half

years later. It is at this point that Mack receives an unmarked letter in the mail from 'Papa' inviting him meet him at the shack. Despite his misgivings, Mack does go and there he meets God in his three persons: God the Father, an African American woman named Papa, Jesus, a middle-eastern carpenter dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, and the Holy Spirit, Sarayu, an Asian woman who is partially obscured by the light that surrounds her. (This paper will refer to characters that appear as females as 'she', but God as a whole will be called 'he'. There is some overlap here.) After the initial meeting, *The Shack* becomes a series of conversations between Mack and each of these three persons.

THE SHACK AND SUFFERING

There is no escaping the theme of suffering in *The Shack*. The reader feels the horror of the thirteen year old Mack tied to a tree while his alcoholic father beats him; the torture of not knowing whether his little girl is dead or alive; the revulsion at seeing her crumpled, bloodstained dress on the floor of the shack; the injustice of the killer who gets away with it; the anger at God for letting it all happen. This is the question that drives Mack to the shack and the recurring theme throughout his theological discussions. This book goes where few others dare: it looks suffering in its broad ugly face and asks the difficult questions.

In response, a few of the more common theodicies are given: that God doesn't do anything evil, in fact evil is the absence of God (p.126); that evil is a direct result of free will—Papa respecting the choices of humans (p.123); that good can come from evil (p.136). However, the real strength of the suffering discussion is the focus on God's character and whether he is trustworthy. Papa says, "If you knew that I was good and that everything... is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me" (p.126). Thus begins Mack's investigation into whether God is good. This comes to a head in his meeting with Sophia, the personification of Papa's wisdom. She asks Mack to judge

between his children—to save two of them and condemn the other three to Hell. He is unable to do so and pleads that he might take their place instead. The natural parallel with Jesus is brought to the fore here and the reader sees that God is indeed good, for Papa shared in Jesus' suffering because he could not bear to condemn any of his children. (Papa is also scarred by the nails of Jesus' cross, p.95). Having realised that God is good and understanding the horror that it is to judge or condemn those you love, Mack chooses to trust God. Even if he does not understand his purposes, knowing that God is good is enough. This focus on God's character is important, and reflects Scripture to a degree (e.g. Job 41, 2 Cor 12:9).

So, would I recommend this book to a friend who is suffering? Part of me would love to, for it affirms so strongly that God is good. However, I am not convinced of the basis for God's goodness (more on that later). Furthermore, God's goodness is not compelling enough in the narrative to be a sufficient answer to Mack's suffering. This is demonstrated in two ways. Firstly, Young downplays the horror of suffering by replacing fear with God's peace.

Jesus tells Mack,

At first the fear was overwhelming and [Missy] was in shock... But as Sarayu wrapped herself around her, Missy settled down... I can tell you there was not a moment that we were not with her. She knew my peace and you would have been proud of her. (p.173)

This offers little to the person who has suffered and felt abandoned by God, for it is based on a feeling: an experience that may not be shared by the reader. It seems, though, that the thought of a child suffering so tremendously is just too much for Young, and his answer too inadequate to offer a solution. Secondly, he softens the blow of suffering for Mack by offering closure. Sophia brings him to a waterfall through which he can see Missy 'alive' again and Papa also shows him where Missy's body is in the real world. As a result, Mack is able to lead the police to Missy's body and the evidence of it leads to the conviction of the killer. While I understand the need to bring resolution to the narrative, the voice of my second year English professor at uni still echoes in my head: "The ending of a text reveals its

ideology. What was too uncomfortable for the author to leave unresolved?" In this case, it seems that the answer that God was good simply wasn't enough for Young. Again, this offers little to those for whom suffering is their constant companion or for whom closure is not available. They need answers that can stand alone, without having to either play down suffering or bring resolution to it. However, *The Shack* is unable to offer such answers, for it all but ignores the significance of Jesus' work on the cross.

THE SHACK AND THE ATONEMENT

At the heart of *The Shack* is a call for humans to give up their independence, to return to God, to rest in him. Relationship with God is viewed very positively. For example, when Mack first enters the shack, he is enveloped in a big bear hug by Papa and feels the presence of love, "warm, inviting, melting" (p.83). Indeed, this is the primary presentation of Papa in *The Shack*: in her words, she is "especially fond" of each her children (p.118). Living in relationship with God is by far the most fulfilling way to live. And so this is the end goal—the reconciliation of the world to Papa (p.192).

While this is a goal that I would well love to affirm, the mechanism that *The Shack* presents for accomplishing reconciliation is feeble in the light of the Bible's teaching about sin. Mack asks Papa whether she enjoys punishing those who disappoint her and she replies, "I don't need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish it; it's my joy to cure it" (p.120). While the defense of God's character is understandable, that he is not capricious or sadistic, Young oversteps the mark here. In his attempt to portray God as loving, he suggests that sin is not abhorrent to God and that humans are not culpable for it.

According to *The Shack*, people are enslaved to sin, but they are not personally responsible for it. Papa tells Mack that she has never placed any expectations on her children and so she has never been disappointed with them (p.206). Consequently, there is no mark from which humans fall short, in contrast to what Romans 3:23 suggests. Instead, when Papa looks at sinful

humans, he sees them as the victims of sin, not the perpetrators of it. And since they are not personally responsible for it, Papa's favour extends to all humans. Nowhere is this clearer than in Papa's description of Missy's murderer as a "broken child that has been twisted by his pain" (p.225). The Bible affirms that each of us are born into sin (Rom. 5:12) and that we are powerless to do anything about it (Eph. 2:1). But at no point does the God of the Bible refrain from holding people to account for their sin. Unlike Papa, who looks at people and "judges them worthy of love" (p.160), the Bible tells us that the wages for our sin is death (Rom. 6:23) and that we are all without excuse in the face of a holy God (Rom. 1:20).

But God's holiness is not on view in *The Shack*. In fact, the emphasis is on God's likeness to humanity, not his otherness. Firstly, of course, all three persons of the Godhead appear to Mack as human (or like-human). While Papa does tell Mack that she is not like him (p.97), she does little to illustrate this other than to say things he can't understand at times. God's behavior downplays his difference from humans. For example, Papa is unperturbed by Mack's self-righteous questioning of her motives (p.120), unlike the God of Job 41 who points out the arrogance this requires. Similarly, there is much talk about God limiting his sovereignty and power for the sake of humans but little discussion of how these characteristics set him apart as totally unlike others. Then there is Papa's apparent acceptance of the mundane aspects of a fallen world, even to the point where Papa and Sarayu joke about Jesus' clumsiness when he drops a bowl (p.104).

And because God in *The Shack* is so like humans in many ways, he does not demand our righteousness. Forget the God of the Bible's demand to "be holy as I am holy" (Lev.19:2, 1 Pet. 1:16), the God of *The Shack* is held to ransom by the Old Testament law which almost forces him to bring people's sins to mind (p.224). But in the story of *The Shack*, that's acceptable because people are presented as victims of sin rather than the perpetrators of it. Thus, it is unproblematic for God to overlook personal sin and feel only compassion.

In the light of the biblical evidence, however, this is only half the story. It is difficult to read Scripture without encountering God's wrath against evil and those who do it, from the flood in the Old Testament through to Jesus' story of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-46) and the lake of burning sulfur at the end of time (Rev. 21:8). Most disturbingly, *The Shack* sees the cross not as the place where judgement is carried out and borne by the living God himself, but as a vague means of achieving reconciliation. When Mack asks Papa exactly what was accomplished at the cross, she replies,

Creation and history are all about Jesus. He is the very centre of our purpose and in him we are now fully human, so our purpose and your destiny are forever linked. You might say that we have put all our eggs in the one human basket. (p.192)

While it seems that God identifies with humans, expressing his solidarity with them through Jesus dying on the cross, little is accomplished in the way of salvation from sin.

The cross is fundamentally misrepresented here. Young misses the wonder of the cross, that Jesus bore not only our infirmities and pain but also our sin. He took our punishment and paid our debt. This is love: not to suffer for the sake of being united with humanity, who are, after all, pretty lovable, but to love the unlovely and to die in the place of the despicable, that they might be washed and clean before the holy God. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). By the diminishing of sin, the death of Jesus in *The Shack* is no longer portrayed as God dying for his enemies, but God dying for his friends. In so doing, the love of God is proportionally weakened. The implications of this are not simply damaging: they can be soul destroying.

Firstly, this kind of theology presents a God who is not just. Papa affirms that it's fine for Mack to be angry with the killer of his daughter. Papa says, "What [the killer] did was terrible. He caused incredible pain to many. It was wrong and anger is the right response to something that is so wrong" (p. 227). But there is still to be no punishment for him. The closest that Papa gets to suggesting that there may be consequences for the killer is when he

tells Mack, “One day you will pray for his wholeness and give him over to me so that my love will burn from his life every vestige of corruption” (p.227). Not surprisingly, Mack groans when he hears this and his stomach churns, as does mine! For, “It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the innocent of justice” (Prov. 18:5). The conundrum of the cross is that in punishing sin, God shows his goodness, upholding his own glory and bringing justice to those who have been hurt. If God does not punish sin, he sets the perpetrators free and is not good after all.

Secondly, to the person who is suffering, this God appears cold and unconcerned by their pain. In his unwillingness to bring the perpetrator of evil to justice, he makes a mockery of the sin committed against the victim, as if it is not serious enough to warrant punishment. He is saddened but empathy is as far as it goes—Papa does not act upon this. The cross, on the other hand, shows the gravity of this sin. It was not something to be overlooked, but something to be paid for, so grave in fact, that only the Son of God could atone for it. And should the perpetrator not accept Jesus’ death of his behalf, his sin continues to testify against him and the punishment will remain his.

CONCLUSION

God is patient, not wanting anyone to perish (2 Pet. 3:9) but the fact remains that he has set a day when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed (Acts 17:31). God’s holiness and the wrongs committed against him and others demand judgement, a fact which *The Shack* overlooks. In doing so, it offers little to the suffering person who will not see justice wrought, for while God feels sad, he does not act. This is incongruent with the God of the Bible whose compassion for humanity led him not just to feel sad but to act definitively, bearing “our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). While *The Shack* rightly points out that if God is good, he can be trusted, God can not be good if he is not also just. Only the God of the cross has acted definitively in history to bring justice. Only he can be trusted as good and bring both

comfort and vindication for the suffering person.