

Summary of the book:

The Shack begins with a brief foreword in which the reader is introduced to Mackenzie Allan Phillips, or "Mack", a man who was raised by an abusive, alcoholic, and yet church-going, "Christian" father. Betrayed by a church leader to whom he had confided the abusive behavior, Mack is beaten by his Bible-quoting dad. After running away from home, Mack experiences many things as a world traveler, even attending a seminary in Australia (so apparently he continues thinking of himself as a Christian in spite of his childhood). Eventually he marries a deeply spiritual woman named Nan and they have five children. The foreword also reveals that Mack had lived for around four years with *The Great Sadness* hanging over him. However, an amazing experience three years ago, about to be recounted in the book, changed "*the melody of his life*".¹

The first chapter opens with Mack receiving a mysterious note in his mailbox on a winter night during an ice storm. The note says, "*Mackenzie, It's been a while. I've missed you. I'll be at the shack next weekend if you want to get together.*"² The note is signed "Papa". The reason for Mack's emotional reaction to this letter is made clear later in the book when the significance of the shack is revealed. Mack cautiously believes the note to be from God himself, since "Papa" is the name his wife uses to refer to God, and the other possibilities of the note's origin seem unconvincing to him.

In subsequent chapters the reader learns the source of *The Great Sadness*. The story flashes back to a family camping trip, during which his youngest daughter, Missy, is abducted by a serial killer while Mack is busy saving his son from drowning. After a grueling search, no body is found, but indisputable evidence is found of Missy's death when her blood-soaked dress is found in an old shack deep in the forest.

So Mack travels alone to the shack to encounter whatever awaits him there. Arriving and finding nothing, he falls asleep in the cold. Awakening some time later he says, "*I'm done, God. I can't do this anymore. I'm tired of trying to find you in all of this.*" The narrator then comments: "*Mack determined that this was the last time he would go looking for God. If God wanted him, God would have to come find him.*"³ At this he gets up to leave, but as he is walking away from the shack, the whole forest is transformed from the dead of winter to an early summer day in the space of a few seconds.

Mack approaches the shack, now transformed into a tidy log cabin and upon knocking, encounters "*a large, beaming African-American woman.*"⁴ What follows in the bulk of the book are a series of conversations that Mack has with this woman, who is "Papa" and her son, Jesus, and a woman named Sarayu. During Mack's weekend spent with "God", various analogies and allegorical elements are included in the narrative as Papa/Jesus/Sarayyu bring Mack to a better understanding of God's being, the significance of Jesus, and the work of the Holy Spirit, along with many other theological themes.

In one of the more significant scenes, Mack is sent by Jesus into a cave where he encounters a female figure called "Sophia", a personification of God's wisdom. Sophia tells Mack that he must judge which three of his five children will be sent to hell. Mack protests and finally, in tears, offers himself as their substitute. Sophia then comments,

¹ p. 12

² p. 16

³ p. 80

⁴ p. 82

"Now you sound like Jesus."⁵ Mack is then allowed to see Missy in heaven and begins a healing process as he learns to trust God's wisdom and his goodness.

More conversations ensue, and then two significant events are related. First, God gives Mack an experience of meeting his abusive father in a heaven-like scene in which the father is obviously redeemed and anxiously desiring reconciliation with his son.⁶ Second, Papa (who at this point in the story reveals himself as a man) takes Mack on a hike where the location of Missy's body is revealed. Before the discovery, however, Papa brings Mack to the point of forgiving the murderer.⁷ Missy's body is taken back to the cabin where Jesus has fashioned a coffin for her. A burial ensues in a garden, tended by Sarayu, which represents Mack's soul.

As Mack's weekend with God comes to a close, he is given the opportunity to choose whether or not he will return to his family, or stay there in "heaven" with God and with Missy. Mack chooses to return, and on his way home, is broad-sided by a drunk driver and awakens several days later from a coma.

Recovering from the accident, Mack is able to help bring emotional healing to his daughter, who had blamed herself for her sister's death, and his friends and family begin to notice a difference in him. Once recovered, he is able to guide law-enforcement to the place where Missy's body had been hidden.

In the afterword, it is mentioned that Mack is testifying at the murderer's trial, but is also seeking an opportunity to meet with his daughter's killer.⁸ The whole experience has changed Mack. He is no longer mad at God, but at peace. *The Great Sadness* no longer defines him; he is free to love and to be himself.

Introductory Comments

The purpose of this review is to take a closer look at the picture of God painted by William P. Young in *The Shack*. I have tried to be as fair as possible by including extensive explanations of the context of Young's statements. I have tried to point out positive elements where possible, although my overall evaluation of the book is very negative. I believe that Young has painted a picture of God and his dealings with mankind that is not faithful to the revelation of God that we have in the Bible.

My heart has been heavy as I have studied this book and prepared this review. Many of my friends and some respected church leaders have either embraced and praised *The Shack*, or have indicated that its flaws are minor. This review is written primarily for them. My prayer is that God would use my words, written, I hope, in humble submission to the Word of God to open the eyes of my dear brothers and sisters to the errors of this book. Should they choose to disagree with me, I will still love them, but I will grieve.

The God presented in *The Shack* is not the God that I have encountered in the Bible, and through the Bible, in my personal experience. The profound differences that I see between the two are on two different levels.

⁵ p. 163

⁶ pp. 209-217

⁷ pp. 218-230

⁸ p. 248

First of all, there is a profound difference on the level of Young's ***fictional portrayal*** of God using the characters Papa, Jesus and Sarayu.⁹ I am referring here not to what these characters *say about* God, but to what is communicated about God through the characters' identities and personalities and actions.

Any attempt to present the God of the Bible in fiction should *amplify* and *clarify* the revelation that he has already given us in his Word. Where there have been cultural traces added, they must be stripped away. Where there has been a departure from the biblical picture, correction must be made. (For example, it is correct to debunk the idea of God as "a really big grandpa with a long white flowing beard, sort of like Gandalf in Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*"¹⁰) But the Papa/Jesus/Sarayu characters do not amplify and clarify Biblical revelation at all. They depart from Biblical revelation to present God in a *new way, a different way*.

When held up to the pages and pages of revelation that we have in inspired Scripture, Papa/Jesus/Sarayu just doesn't match the God of the Bible! Young's portrayal may be a picture of God that some enjoy, it may evoke certain feelings, and, in their opinion, give them a more "positive" view of God, but does it amplify what God has already revealed to us? To the contrary, I believe that an honest appraisal shows that it minimizes or even ignores the majesty and glory of the God of the Bible.¹¹

But because this first level is much more subjective, I plead with those who have embraced and appreciated the God of *The Shack* to take the time to consider the evidence on the more objective level of what Young actually says about God through his book, or in other words, his ***theological portrayal*** of God.

Analyses of the different theological themes in the book:

For a book that so many are claiming "was never meant to be a theological textbook," William P. Young addresses a sizable number of important theological themes in his novel, including...

- God's nature as a Trinity,
- God's transcendence over creation
- God's immanence within creation
- God's attributes such as wisdom, foreknowledge, justice, love, grace, mercy, omnipresence
- God's purposes for his creation
- Christ's work on the cross
- Spiritual union with Christ
- God's relationship to evil
- The nature of human freedom and God's interaction with it

⁹ Comparisons have been made to the lion, Aslan, in the Chronicles of Narnia. There is a difference, though, between Aslan, whom Lewis never presents as God, and Papa/Jesus/Sarayu, who *within the fictional framework* are presented as God, who chooses to manifest himself to Mack in this way. Aslan, within the stories, *represents* God to us. Papa/Jesus/Sarayu, within the story, *is* God.

¹⁰ p. 73

¹¹ The controversy over presenting God as a woman belongs both to the first level as well as the second level. I suppose there are other areas also, where these two levels overlap.

- God's authority
- and Heaven

To say that this book is not about theology as I have heard some say is to avoid the obvious. It is profoundly about theology. Any portrayal of God offered for our consideration is theology. And it doesn't matter whether that portrayal comes from a fictional author or from a systematic theologian, *both* must be held up to the measuring rod of God's self-revelation in his Word. Even if you do not agree with all that I write below, I challenge you to do the following: Try to express in writing what you feel that you have learned about God from *The Shack*. Then go to the Scripture and to the writings of gifted teachers, given by God to the Church (Eph. 4:11-14).¹² See if there is a biblical foundation for the insights you have gained from Young's book.

Sin and evil

It is undeniable that sin/evil is a major theme in the novel.¹³ Mack's misconceptions about God are clearly traced back to the sinful behavior of his abusive father. And Mack's struggle with the evil of his daughter's murder is the source of most of the questions that he poses to Papa/Jesus/Sarayu.

So what does Young say about the origin and nature of sin and evil? In chapter 9, Mack has a conversation with Sarayu in a garden that is later revealed to be the garden of his own soul. As they work with the various plants, the subject turns to poisonous plants.¹⁴ Sarayu points out that everything created by God was good. Then she breaks off the twig of a poisonous plant and tells Mack to take it. After protesting at first that it is poisonous, Mack comes to understand that it is safe to take because it was Sarayu who told him to take it. The lesson is then drawn that evil is the result of man choosing to decide for himself what is good and what is evil. Sarayu then applies this to the Garden of Eden: Adam's sin lay in his seizing for himself the right to decide what is good and what is evil. Here Young has given a very good explanation of the origin of sin and the nature of what occurred at the Fall.

Continuing on, Sarayu points out to Mack, *"if there is no reality of good that is absolute, then you have lost any basis for judging. It is just language, and one might as well exchange the word good for the word evil."*¹⁵ Here again Young rightly points to the necessity of moral absolutes, an encouraging word in the face of the moral relativism that so plagues us today.

Sarayu speaks of the consequences of sin when she states that it was through this simple choice that death entered the world. *"They died, expelling in the breath of their*

¹² Anti-intellectualism is just as wrong as lifeless intellectualism. To assume that systematic theologians do not have a heart that yearns to know God in the fulness of his self-revelation is a prejudice that will cut one off from a wealth of life-giving truth available to us through spiritually gifted teachers. Just because someone "knows something in their brain" (Young's veiled criticism of theologians on p. 198) doesn't imply that they don't also know God from the heart.

¹³ For an excellent and very readable treatment of the problem of evil, see this chapter from Vincent Cheung: <http://www.rmiweb.org/other/problemevil.pdf>

¹⁴ pp. 133-135

¹⁵ p. 135

*choice the very breath of God.*¹⁶ I can affirm this also as a poignant and Scriptural statement of what mankind lost in the Fall.

When Mack asks how to fix the problem, Sarayu says, *“You must give up your right to decide what is good and evil on your own terms.”*¹⁷ Again, I can affirm this as a statement that speaks of repentance, and that calls us to submit once again to the Lordship of our Creator.

But is it enough to say that we must give up this wrongly appropriated right? How are we to give this up when it is what, by nature, we cling to most dearly? And what about the *seriousness* of this sin of deciding good and evil for ourselves? What does the Bible say is man’s present status before God because of this sin? Scripture clearly states that mankind is under the wrath of God. Consider Romans 2:5 *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.* (see also, Rom. 1:18, Rom. 9:22, Eph. 2:3, Col. 3:6, Rev. 6:16-17, Rev. 16:1, Isa. 63:6, Jer. 21:12, and many, many more).

How does Young understand the wrath of God? In chapter 8, Mack asks Papa if there is anyone that she is not “fond” of (Young’s favorite word to speak of God’s love¹⁸). Her reply, *“Nope, I haven’t been able to find any. Guess that’s jes’ the way I is.”* Mack then asks, *“Do you ever get mad at any of them?”* and Papa responds that she certainly does, just as any parent would get angry with his children, but that *“anger--especially for me—is an expression of love all the same. I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I’m not.”*¹⁹

Mack then angrily asks Papa about the wrath of God. He says things like, *“Weren’t you always running around killing people in the Bible?”* and, *“But if you are God, aren’t you the one spilling out great bowls of wrath and throwing people into a burning lake of fire? ... Don’t you enjoy punishing those who disappoint you?”*²⁰

Here is Papa’s answer: *“I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it. It’s my joy to cure it.”*²¹

First of all, notice that Mack paints a caricature of God’s wrath. Rather than correct this, Papa essentially denies any wrath at all. Revelation *does* speak of bowls of wrath. The Bible *does* speak of a lake of fire into which sinners are thrown. But what explanation does Papa give of that? None. To the contrary, wrath is simply denied, even in the face of scriptural revelation that Mack has, albeit disrespectfully, alluded to and asked about.²²

¹⁶ p. 135

¹⁷ p. 136

¹⁸ By using “fond” instead of “love”, Young leads the reader to make a category mistake, confusing the love of God with human love.

¹⁹ pp. 118-119

²⁰ p. 119

²¹ p. 120

²² It is worthy of note that no character mentioned in the book comes under God’s eternal condemnation. Young doesn’t give any firm indication that he is a universalist, but he also offers no positive confirmation of the contrary. The concept of certain eternal punishment for unrepentant sinners is just not mentioned.

God is pictured not as actively punishing sin, but as allowing sin to be its own punishment. The punishment of sin is "not God's purpose" so punishment is something that God doesn't desire, but that happens to people against God's will.

Is this the biblical picture of God's wrath for sin? Is it biblical to say, "*It is not God's purpose to punish sin?*" Consider these verses:

*(God) repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. **He will repay him** to his face (Deut. 7:10).*

*What will you do on **the day of punishment**,
in the ruin that will come from afar?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth? (Isa. 10:3)*

*...then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and **to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment** (2 Pet. 2:9).*

*"...these shall go away into **eternal punishment**" (Matt. 25:46).*

*5 This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering— 6 since indeed God considers it just **to repay with affliction** those who afflict you, 7 and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, **inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.** 9 **They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction**, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed (2 Thess. 1:5-10).*

But of first importance would be this passage from Isaiah 53:5-6

*5 But he was wounded for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement (punishment) that brought us peace,
and with his stripes we are healed.
6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

To say that it is "not God's purpose to punish sin" is to misunderstand the glorious work of Jesus on the cross as he bore our punishment. The cross was God's purpose from before the creation of the world, so yes, it is God's purpose to punish sin. When Young denies God's purposeful punishment of sin, he is denying the gospel, which is the good news that "the punishment that brought us peace, was upon him."

Is it truthful to say that God's anger is "*an expression of his love*"? As Papa says, "*I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I'm not.*"²³ No one can deny that God

²³ If this statement is applied in the context of God's loving discipline of his children, then, yes, it is correct to say that his anger is an "expression of his love" (see Ps. 30:5, Isa. 54:8). But Young is not talking about fatherly discipline here. Remember that Papa has just said that she, "has never found **anyone** that she is not fond of".

loves the entire world and that His love is immeasurable. Yet how can we ignore passages like Psalm 5:4-5: *"For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers."*

While it is popular to say that "God loves the sinner and hates the sin", the biblical truth is that the sinner is facing the holy hatred of God! (see also Dt. 32:40-42, Prov. 1:24-28, Isa. 63:3). We are his enemies, turned against him. According to Ephesians 2:3, we are by nature *"children of wrath"* (and this verse is referring to God's wrath). How hard it is for us to grasp that even so, God would send his Son to die for us. Romans 5:10, *"...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son..."*

I don't pretend to be able to explain how God can be wrathful toward us and show us such infinite love at the same time, but it is what the Bible teaches, and to teach that there is not a real anger toward the sinner not only misdiagnoses the true depths of our sin problem, it rips out the very heart of the gospel message, destroying all true worship of our Savior who loved us when we deserved his holy hatred.

God's love and his justice

In our discussion of sin and evil, we have already crossed over into the twin themes of God's love and his justice. How are we to understand these two equally important divine attributes?²⁴ Let's look at one of the more relevant sections of Young's book.

The clearest statement on judgment is in chapter 11, appropriately titled, *"Here Come Da Judge"*. In this chapter, Mack has an encounter with Sophia, God's wisdom personified as a breathtakingly *"tall, beautiful, olive-skinned woman with chiseled Hispanic features."*²⁵ Sophia reveals to Mack that he is present there with her for judgment, but not his own, rather he is to do the judging. After helping Mack see that all of the criteria by which he judges people are lacking, she says, *"Judging requires that you think yourself superior over the one you judge."*²⁶

Sophia then tells Mack that he is there to judge God and the human race. When he protests, Sophia points out how many evil people there are in the world and asks, *"Don't they deserve judgment?"* She then asks about those who would even prey on innocent girls, *"What about him, Mackenzie? Is that man guilty? Should he be judged?"* At this Mack screams back at Sophia, *"Yes, Damn him to hell!"*

Sophia then asks about the father of his daughter's killer, the one who warped his son so badly that he became a serial killer. She says, *"How far do we go back, Mackenzie? This legacy of brokenness goes all the way back to Adam, what about him? Why stop there? What about God? God started this whole thing. Is God to blame?"*

Mack finally erupts and says, *"Yes, God is to blame."* At this, Sophia says that if he is able to judge God so easily, then he is certainly capable of judging the world, and tells

²⁴ I have heard many say that Young is trying to correct an undue emphasis on God's justice and his wrath by showing the love of God. I've even heard people say that Mack didn't need to understand God's wrath because he had an abusive father, and thus he already knew about wrath. But God's pure, holy wrath, springing from his justice is not even remotely comparable to the wrath of a drunken, abusive, hypocritical "Christian" father. God's holy wrath is nothing like sinful human wrath.

²⁵ p. 152

²⁶ p. 159

him he must decide which two of his five children will go to heaven, and which three will be condemned to hell.²⁷

When Mack protests, Sophia points out that she is only asking him to do *"something that you believe God does. He knows every person ever conceived.... He loves each one according to his knowledge of the being of that son or daughter. You believe he will condemn most to an eternity of torment, away from his presence and apart from his love. Is that not true?... So you suppose that God does this easily, but you cannot?"*

As Sophia presses Mack to choose, he finally breaks down, and screaming his refusal to judge, he offers to be condemned himself in the place of his children. At this Sophia smiles radiantly at him and says, *"Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well, Mackenzie. I am so proud of you.... You have judged them worthy of love, even if it costs you everything. That is how Jesus loves.... And now you know Papa's heart...who loves all his children perfectly."*

When Mack asks Sophia why God doesn't do anything about the darkness and chaos in the world, Sophia points out that he already has done something: *"He chose the way of the cross where mercy triumphs over justice because of love. Would you prefer he'd chosen justice for everyone?"*²⁸

At the very end of the chapter, Sophia makes this amazing summary statement: *"Mackenzie, judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right."*²⁹

Attempting to evaluate this conversation about judgment is a minefield. We have a confusing mixture of statements, some of which can be clearly proven to be biblical, others clearly unbiblical, and still others open to the reader's interpretation.

In the first part of the conversation, it is clear that Sophia is showing Mack that only God is wise enough to judge. This is a reasonable warning for us to avoid judgmentalism. Sophia also rightly helps Mack to see that many times we pass judgment on God when we question his goodness and wisdom due to the circumstances of our lives. This also is true.

But having established that we as humans cannot judge, what does the second half of the conversation reveal about the nature of *God's* judgment?

Notice first of all that Sophia says to Mack that judgment is something he *"believes"* God to do. She goes on to say, *"You **believe** he will condemn..."* Doubt is already being cast as to whether or not this is something that God actually does, rather it is something that Mack *supposes* God will do.

Moving on, a reference is made to what Jesus did on the cross. I will have more to say later about Young's view of the cross, but for right now, notice that the cross is described as a place, *"where mercy triumphs over judgment."*

But the cross is not about God's mercy, which is good, triumphing over his justice, which is bad. The cross is just as much a pure and holy display of God's *justice*, seen in his punishment of sin, as it is a pure and holy display of his *love*, seen in the redemption of sinners. God hates sin and justly punishes it. Young, like so many others these days,

²⁷ pp. 160-162

²⁸ pp. 162-165

²⁹ p. 169

understands the salvation of sinners to be the ultimate purpose of the cross. The cross is undoubtedly for the purpose of saving sinners, but its ultimate purpose is the display of God's glory in the vindication of his righteousness, and the display of his love. At the cross, God's glory shines, both in his just punishment of sin and in his unmerited favor shown toward sinners.³⁰

Romans 3:25-26 says that God put Jesus forward as a propitiation "...to **show God's righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to **show his righteousness** at the present time, **so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**" The cross is a glorious display of God's justice AND his mercy, not his mercy "triumphing over" his justice. So when Sophia asks, "Would you prefer he'd chosen justice for everyone?", we should answer: Yes, and God *did* choose justice at the cross! Everyone's sins are either justly condemned at the cross or in the fires of eternal condemnation. God is gloriously and righteously just with everyone.

If there is any doubt about what Young believes about the nature of God's judgment, the most revealing statement is the last one quoted: "*judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right.*"

In the clear light of this statement, one can only conclude that Young does not believe in the just destruction of unrepentant sinners in hell.³¹ But what about 2 Peter 3:7? *But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of **judgment and destruction of the ungodly.*** Again the relevant scriptures that speak of wrath, judgment and destruction are almost too numerous to cite (Matt. 7:13, Rom. 9:22, Phil. 1:28, 3:19, 1 Thess. 5:3, 2 Thess 1:9, 1 Tim. 6:9, 2 Pet. 2:1-3 and many more).³²

Turning to the love of God, there are also huge problems here. Papa, Sophia says, "*loves all his children perfectly.*" The problem here is that it is not clear whether "children" refers only to the redeemed, or to the whole of humanity. There is evidence in the book that Young makes no distinction between God's love for the redeemed and his love for the world in general.³³ But how can it be supported biblically that God's love for unrepentant sinners who suffer eternal punishment for their sins is the exact same love that is enjoyed by those who spend eternity in his glorious presence?³⁴ Ephesians 1:4-5 says, "*in love, he predestined us for adoption as sons...*" This adopting love is not

³⁰ Someone might argue that "mercy triumphs over judgment" is a biblical phrase, taken from James 2:13, but the context of James 2 is the necessity of "showing mercy" to the needy as evidence that one possesses saving faith. The meaning of the phrase is that one who shows mercy to others will be affirmed at the judgment as having true saving faith. It has nothing to do with *God's* mercy triumphing over *God's* justice.

³¹ Notice that I do not say that Young doesn't believe in hell. He may or may not, but at the least it is clear that he does not believe that Hell is a place where God's judgment is eternally upon the unrepentant sinner as he suffers eternal destruction as the punishment for his sins. Note that this is rightly considered a core belief of most evangelical denominations, found in most evangelical statements of faith.

³² It is *possible* that what Young means is that judgement is not *primarily* about destruction but about setting things right. Judgment is certainly about setting things right, but a very important aspect of setting things right is that evil and wickedness will be judged through the "destruction of the ungodly".

³³ See the discussion earlier under "Sin and Evil" for this evidence.

³⁴ For an excellent discussion of the love of God, see *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, by D.A. Carson.

shown to unrepentant sinners, and it isn't earned or deserved by those who *are* adopted. It isn't based on anything in the recipient but is displayed even before creation through God's predestining.

Young, on the other hand, presents the love of God as based on his foreknowledge of us and his pity of us.³⁵ In this same conversation with Sophia, she says, "*He loves each one [“every person ever conceived”] according to his knowledge of the being of that son or daughter.*"³⁶

When speaking of his love for the murderer of Mack's child, Papa says, "*but I do [love him], Mack, not for what he's become, but **for** the broken child that has been twisted by his pain.*"³⁷ Sophia also commends Mack for judging his children "*worthy of love.... That is how Jesus loves*"

These statements miss the truth that God's love is sovereign and free. God does not love us because he knows something about us. He doesn't even love us because he pities us for the broken people that we are, twisted by our pain. His love is unconditioned on anything outside of himself. It is never because we are "worthy" of it. Jesus doesn't love us because he "judges us worthy of love." God's love is based *only* on his will to love us. Consider Deut. 7:7-8 "*It was not because you were more in number than any other people that **the Lord set his love on you** and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is **because the Lord loves you** and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers...* In other words, God loves you... because he loves you!

What ultimately sets redeemed sinners apart from unrepentant, eternally condemned sinners isn't something that God sees in us... that would make salvation conditioned on something in us. And it certainly isn't because he pities us because in that case, he would save everyone. It is the free, sovereign love of God who loves us because he loves us.

Paul quotes Exodus 33:19 in Romans 9:15-16 *For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.*

The cross of Christ

We have already delved fairly deeply into the significance of what Jesus did on the cross in the preceding sections, but I want to consider more carefully now the various references to Jesus' cross in the book.

I can affirm a couple of excellent statements that are made about the centrality of Jesus Christ. Papa tells Mack, "*Everything is about him (Jesus). And freedom is a process that happens inside a relationship with him.*"³⁸ And later Papa says, "*Everything's about him, you know.*"³⁹ Amen! It is all about Jesus, and that is why it is so important to correctly understand the pivotal event of all history: Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross.

³⁵ A friend of mine, Allan Jenks, pointed out in personal correspondence, *The Shack's* "entire replacement of sin that offends God's holiness, with a mere faultless broken-ness that evokes God's pity."

³⁶ p. 162

³⁷ p. 225

³⁸ p. 95

³⁹ p. 191, repeated on p. 192

Mack asks Papa directly in chapter 13, *"What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?"* Papa's response is, *"Just the substance of everything that love purposed from before the foundations of the Creation."* And a few paragraphs later, the conversation specifies this further: *"...through his death and resurrection, I am now fully reconciled to the world."*

"The whole world? You mean those who believe in you, right?"

"The whole world, Mack. All I am telling you is that reconciliation is a two-way street, and I have done my part, totally, completely, finally. It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open the way."⁴⁰

Young clearly believes that what Christ accomplished in his death he accomplished equally for all sinners.⁴¹ What are the implications of his view?

First of all, as I have already mentioned at the end of the last section, it means that ultimately our salvation is decided not by what Jesus does, but by what we do. In this view of Jesus' death, God only makes salvation possible. He doesn't secure it for anyone. The difference between the redeemed sinner and the unrepentant sinner ultimately is found to lie in the sinner himself. One is willing to repent and be reconciled, and the other is not. This means that there is a "ground for boasting." The redeemed sinner can truthfully say to the unrepentant sinner. "You would be saved if only you would be like me. Wise up, friend, and come to Christ!"

At this point, I think it is worth quoting in its entirety, 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

This and many other passages like it show that the difference between the redeemed sinner and the unrepentant sinner is God's choice. And that choice is made "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

Remember Ephesians 1:4-6 mentioned earlier, which says that, *"...he chose us in him before the foundation of the world.... In love, he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace.*

It is *"by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."* (Eph. 2:8-9). We are saved by grace, not by our choice.⁴² Yes, we do choose to come to Christ, and there is

⁴⁰ pp. 191-192

⁴¹ p. 225 Papa says, *"In Jesus, I have forgiven all humans for their sins against me, but only some choose relationship."*

⁴² on p. 156, after pointing out that Mack is able to love his children in a way that he was not loved by his own father, Sophia says, *"...it was God and you **together** who changed you to love this way."* Note that the glory for godly love produced in Mack is not given completely to God, but to both God and Mack.

a lot more that can be said about the relationship between our free will and God's sovereignty.⁴³

Moving along, what does Young have to say about *how* Christ's cross saves us? Here once again we have to navigate through some confusing statements.

In chapter 16, Mack is on his outing to find his daughter's body with Papa (who now reveals himself as a male). As they pause to rest, Papa challenges Mack that in order to forgive his daughter's killer, Mack must release him to God and allow God to redeem him.⁴⁴ As Mack struggles with his hatred of the killer, Papa says, "*Son, this is not about shaming you. I don't do humiliation, or guilt, or condemnation. They don't produce one speck of wholeness or righteousness, and that is why they were nailed into Jesus on the cross.*"⁴⁵

Consider for a moment why I say that Young is so confusing to read. On the one hand, it is profoundly true that our guilt and our condemnation and humiliation were nailed into Jesus on the cross. Amen! But what does Young mean by this statement? He has already stated, as we saw earlier, "*it is not God's purpose to punish sin... (but) to cure it.*"⁴⁶ Was it not God's purpose to punish sin at the cross? Giving Young the benefit of the doubt and assuming that he does mean to say that God punished our sin in Christ, how does Young believe this happened? What did Christ do for us on the cross that did away with our guilt?

On p. 224, Papa says, speaking of forgiving and forgetting sins, "*...forgetting for me is the choice to limit myself. Son...because of Jesus, there is now no law demanding that I bring your sins back to mind.*"

As far as I can remember, this is the only reference to Law in the whole book, and it is good that Young appears at least to imply here that apart from what Jesus did on the cross, we stand before God condemned by his own holy Law, and with our sins on his mind!⁴⁷

And what does the Bible say about the penalty the Law prescribes, the punishment that hangs over us because of our sins? It is the death penalty, eternal separation from God. It is the curse of the Law that demands our death. We deserve to be forsaken by God eternally. For this reason, Jesus went to the cross, to die in our place, to receive in his flesh the wrath of God that we deserve, the separation from God that we deserve, the full punishment of our sin that we deserve.

⁴³ For now, consider this quote from C.H. Spurgeon:

How shall those who are the subjects of divine election sufficiently adore the grace of God? They have no room for boasting, for sovereignty most effectually excludes it. The Lord's will alone is glorified, and the very notion of human merit is cast out to everlasting contempt. There is no more humbling doctrine in Scripture than that of election, none more promotive of gratitude, and, consequently, none more sanctifying. Believers should not be afraid of it, but adoringly rejoice in it. (From "Morning and Evening" November 25)

⁴⁴ p. 224

⁴⁵ p. 223

⁴⁶ p. 120

⁴⁷ It is amazing that only one small reference is given, and that only implied, to the just punishment that we deserve for our sins. In light of all the confusing things said about punishment earlier, this seems to me woefully insufficient.

But in Mack's first conversation with Papa, after showing him the scars in her wrists, Papa says, *"Don't ever think that what my son chose to do didn't cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark.... We were there together."*

But Mack protests, reminding Papa of Jesus' words, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

To which Papa responds, *"You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he **felt** (emphasis in the original) at the moment, I never left him."* And then later on she says, *"Don't forget, the story didn't end in his sense of forsakenness. He found his way through it to put himself completely into my hands."⁴⁸*

This is what happens when God's love is emphasized to the exclusion of his righteousness. Young has completely missed the significance of the cross of Christ. Confused, he makes an allusion to just judgment in his reference to the Law, but then turns around and denies that the penalty that God's law demands was ever exacted upon our Savior. With this statement, Young has ripped out of the cross the substance of what Jesus did for us. Jesus *was* abandoned. He didn't just *feel* abandoned. He was punished. He didn't just appear to be punished. Without this, we have no salvation!

Let me attempt to summarize Young's view of the cross. He does seem to vaguely point to something that he believes Jesus accomplished on the cross that removed the sin and guilt of all humanity. But because he sees this work as being applied to all humanity without distinction, the way to salvation is not through repentance before the Judge of all the earth, who has lovingly made a way of salvation through Jesus. Rather, salvation is simply by coming to appreciate what Jesus did for all humanity (which is never clearly defined).

Consider the following statements from chapter 13. Papa explains that it was through hearing the story of an Indian princess who sacrificed her life in order to save the rest of the tribe that Mack's daughter, *"came to appreciate what Jesus did for her and the whole human race."⁴⁹* And as Mack tries to accept that Papa loves him and patiently waits for him to respond to that love, Mack says, *"Okay, now I'm feeling guilty."* To which Papa replies, *"Let me know how that works for you.... it's not about feeling guilty. Guilt'll never help you find freedom in me. The best it can do is make you try harder to conform to some ethic on the outside. I'm about the inside."⁵⁰*

For Young, salvation is not through repentance and faith, but through "appreciating", and that without guilt, what Jesus did on the cross, which is never clearly defined. Such a salvation is only a hollow shell. It may have power to transform a fictional character like Mack, but it will never eternally save a condemned sinner.

The gospel that saves calls sinners to repentance and faith. It saves by showing us Jesus, our substitute⁵¹, receiving on the cross the punishment that our sins deserve. When by grace we see and understand what Jesus did for us, we turn from our sins,

⁴⁸ p. 96

⁴⁹ p. 185

⁵⁰ p. 187

⁵¹ The concept of Jesus' death as our **substitute** is completely absent from the Shack. One could argue that Young didn't intend to treat the nature of Christ's work on the cross, but that would be evasive. Mack asks directly what Jesus accomplished on the cross, and Young does not give the Biblical answer to that question.

knowing that this is only possible because through our identification with him by faith, his cross is our cross, and our sinful selves are crucified and then we are raised to new life through our union with Him (see Romans 6). That in a nutshell is the gospel message, and it is nowhere to be found in *The Shack*.

Authority and relationships

In chapter 8, Mack is enjoying a breakfast meal with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu. As the conversation progresses, Mack notices the way that the three talk with one another. He says, *"I love the way you treat each other. It's certainly not how I expected God to be."* He points to the graciousness and simplicity and beauty with which they treat each other and then asks, *"Isn't one of you more the boss than the other two?"* This then leads into a conversation about the nature of the relationships shared between the persons of the Trinity. As Mack continues to ask questions, he struggles to find the right words to express his traditional understanding of these relationships. He speaks of God the Father being "the boss" and Jesus being the one "following orders." He tries out the term, "chain of command." All of this is met with puzzlement by Papa and Jesus.

As Papa begins to explain to Mack the nature of the relationships within the Trinity, she says, *"Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a **circle** (emphasis in the original) of relationship, not a chain of command, or 'great chain of being' as your ancestors termed it. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us. Actually, this is your problem, not ours."⁵²*

Throughout the whole discussion that takes place on the nature of authority, there is no distinction made between human abuses of authority and power on the one hand and on the other, holy and right exercise of authority and power within the Trinity. We can only take Young's comments at face value and say that the reason he makes no distinction is that he doesn't see any distinction. As the conversation continues, Papa describes authority as the symptom of the human sin condition. Authority is pictured in *completely* negative terms. (This is so shocking that it is almost unbelievable at first read.) Consider these comments: *"Humans are so lost and damaged that to you it is almost incomprehensible that people could work or live together without someone being in charge."* And later on... *"Authority, as you usually think of it, is merely the excuse the strong use to make others conform to what they want."⁵³*

Papa speaks of a *"diabolical scheme in which you are hopelessly trapped even while completely unaware of its existence."* The diabolical scheme she is referring to is the social structure that puts the survival of the system of power and hierarchy over the good of the individual. This social structure, according to Young, did not exist until sin entered the world.

As Jesus picks up Papa's line of explanation, he points out that it is mankind's stubborn clinging to the idea of authority that keeps us from experiencing genuine relationships with God and with each other: *"It's one reason why experiencing true relationship is so difficult for you."* He goes on to point out, *"As the crowning glory of Creation, you were free to simply 'be' in relationship with me and one another. If you had truly learned to*

⁵² pp. 121-122

⁵³ pp. 122-123

*regard each other's concerns as significant as your own, there would be no need for hierarchy.*⁵⁴

So, for Young, there is no authority expressed intrinsically in the Trinity, and there was no authority or hierarchy in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. All authority and hierarchical expression of that authority is at its best a necessary evil, and at its worst, a diabolical scheme.

Before I get to the implications of such a view of authority for our understanding of Christian doctrine, let me point out that there is absolutely no warrant either logically or biblically to polarize the concepts of relationship and authority. According to Young, hierarchical authority structures militate against real relationship. Jesus says, "*Hierarchy imposes laws and rules and you end up missing the wonder of relationship that we intended for you.*"⁵⁵ It is as if Young is assuming that the only meaningful relationship that exists is one that is purely egalitarian! I for one do not want to relate to God as my equal. I desire to relate to him as my sovereign King. I desire to relate to him as my loving Father, with me as his loving, obedient son. I find great joy in submitting myself to Him in obedience.

And far from being a *result* of the Fall, it was man's *rejection* of divine authority and its required obedience that constituted the Fall. It was when Adam and Eve rejected the authority component in their relationship with God that the Fall occurred.

God's saving purpose does not deal a death-blow to authority, but rather restores mankind to a right relationship under the authority of his loving King and Father.

Moving now to the implications of Young's view of relationship and authority for Christian doctrine, some important points need to be made. I'll leave the most important point for last, but first of all, how does this view square with the New Testament, which is full of admonitions to a correct view of and response to divinely constituted authority? What about the instructions to slaves to obey their masters, children to obey their parents, wives to submit to their husbands⁵⁶, citizens to submit to the civil government? Are all of these instructions simply God "*working within our systems, even while he seeks to free us from them*" (Papa gives this explanation to Mack.⁵⁷)?

But much more important than this is the implication of this view for the doctrine of the Atonement. When one removes the concept of authority from what Jesus did for us on the cross, his work on our behalf completely loses meaning. Adam's sin was a rejection of God's authority, shown in his disobedience to God's command. What our Lord Jesus did for us was to *obey* in our place. Earlier we saw the importance of Christ's *penal substitution* on our behalf--Jesus propitiated the wrath of God that we deserve. But Jesus also serves as our substitute in that he *obeyed* in our place.

⁵⁴ p. 124

⁵⁵ p. 123

⁵⁶ One begins to see why Young has chosen to present God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit as women throughout the majority of the book. He sees male authority as necessarily a sinful dominance over women. He has no concept of an authority exercised over one's equal (a right view of male headship as well as the Father/Son/Spirit relationship in the Trinity). By presenting the Father as a woman, he is simply illustrating his point that there is ultimately no submission in the Trinity, and thus no need for the Father to reveal himself as male.

⁵⁷ p. 123

Consider the following scriptures:

*For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's **obedience** the many will be made righteous (Romans 5:19).*

*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming **obedient** to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8).*

*Although he was a son, he learned **obedience** through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.... (Hebrews 5:8-9).*

The phrase "made perfect" in the previous verse doesn't point to sin or defects in Jesus, but rather means "made complete". Jesus was "made perfect" and "learned obedience" in the sense that he completed the mission before him: to submit his will obediently to the will of the Father. This is why Jesus came to earth--to do the will of the Father (Heb. 10:7). If Jesus had not prayed in Gethsemane. "Not my will, but yours be done," (Luke 22:42) his obedience would have been incomplete and lacking, but because he became obedient to death (Phil. 2:8), he fulfilled for us the required obedience that Adam did not fulfill for us.

So to deny the submission of the Son to the Father is to deny the obedience that Jesus performed for us when he lived a perfect life and then went to the cross. Many other passages of Scripture point us to the Father's authority and to the Son's submission to that authority, not just during his earthly ministry but also in eternity past and in the future state.

In addition to the passages above, consider the following...

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,

*"Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.*

*Then I said, 'Behold, **I have come to do your will**, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.'" (Hebrews 10:5-7)*

*So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, **the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing**. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise (John 5:19).*

*So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that **I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me** (John 8:28)*

*For I have **not spoken on my own authority**, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a **commandment**—what to say and what to speak (John 12:49).*

*but I do as **the Father has commanded me**, so that the world may know that I love the Father... (John 14:31).*

*But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and **the head of Christ is God** (1 Cor. 11:3)⁵⁸*

*For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then **the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him**, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:27-28)*

See also Psalm 2; John 4:34; 6:38, 15:10.

Commenting on passages such as these, Bruce Ware, in his excellent (and readable) book on the Trinity says,

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence. The implications are both manifold and wondrous as we ponder this authority-submission structure which not only is accepted but is honored, cherished, and upheld within the Godhead.⁵⁹

Young's portrayal of the relationships within the Trinity is in conflict with what God himself honors, cherishes, and has revealed to us in his Word. In addition, this portrayal further erodes the meaning of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

Another look at what Young says about relationships comes from a different section of the book. Chapter 14 (entitled, *Verbs and Other Freedoms*) begins with a conversation with Sarayu. Sarayu rightly points out to Mack that if we go to the Bible and only see rules and regulations we are missing the point. The purpose of the Word is to point us to Jesus. She says, "*The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules. It is a picture of Jesus.*" And later on, "*Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship--a way of coming to be with us.*"⁶⁰

Here again, Young has polarized the concepts of authority and relationships. Rules and principles are a vital part of the revelation that God has given us in the Bible of how we relate to him. Sarayu encourages us to look for relationship, but this one with whom we relate is referred to in Scripture as the "Lawgiver" and "Judge" (Isaiah 33:22, James

⁵⁸ Note that Paul often uses simply "God" to refer to the Father. Also, I am aware of the debate over the term "head" in this verse. For a defense of "head" as a term of authority rather than "source, origin" see, Wayne Grudem, *The Meaning of Head in the Bible...* at <http://www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-1-No-3/The-Meaning-Of-Head-In-The-Bible>

⁵⁹ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), p. 21. I highly recommend this book for further reading. Ware goes into great detail describing the Biblical teaching not just on the existence of the Trinity, but on the relationships within God's triune Being, which is what Young is trying to do in this section.

⁶⁰ pp. 197-198

4:12). If we take rules out of the equation in our relating to such a One, than this is going to have a serious and negative impact on our relationship!

I can heartily affirm approaching the Bible as a means of coming to Jesus and relating to the Father, Son and Spirit. I have always preached the truth that, in Christ, all the commandments of God are promises! I was pleasantly surprised to hear almost the identical affirmation from Young *"And the Law that once contained impossible demands...actually becomes a promise we fulfill in you."*⁶¹ He has fulfilled them for us and our obedience to them is God's grace to us. But here again we have a very narrow and unhelpful presentation of what it means to truly "relate" to God.

After giving a very good explanation of how God's Law shows us our sin and how Jesus fulfilled the Law for us, Papa goes on to explain to Mack that we are no longer under the Law.⁶² This is blessedly true! But then Mack asks this question: *"Are you telling me that responsibility and expectation are just another form of rules we are no longer under?"*, to which Papa replies, *"Yup."*⁶³

What follows is very clever. Sarayu points out that her *"very essence is a verb."* and that she, *"is much more attuned to verbs than nouns."* She goes on to explain, *"For something to move from death to life you must introduce something living and moving into the mix. To move from something that is only a noun to something dynamic and unpredictable, to something living and present tense, is to move from law to grace. May I give you a couple of examples?"*

And here are the examples she gives: Rather than focus on "responsibility" and "expectation", we should focus on "the ability to respond" and "expectancy". She goes on to say, *"Religion must use law to empower itself and control the people who they need in order to survive."*

"Responsibilities and expectations are the basis of guilt and shame and judgment, and they provide the essential framework that promotes performance as the basis for identity and value."

"Honey, I've never placed an expectation on you or anyone else....because I have no expectations you never disappoint me."^{64,65}

I like Young's attempt to bring the relational aspect to the forefront in our approach to the Law of God. What I don't like is the way he is polarizing relationship and rule-keeping. Here again we must consider what Jesus did for us on the cross. God *does* have expectations of us. He *does* expect us to perform according to his standards. And because we did not and do not, Jesus performed for us. Jesus met the expectations that we could not. It is Jesus' perfect "performance" of the Law of God that is "the basis for our identity and value."

Responsibilities and expectations are not *"the basis of guilt and shame and judgment"* as Young says. Rather it is *unmet* responsibilities and *unfulfilled* expectations that are the basis of our guilt before God.

⁶¹ p. 202

⁶² pp. 202-203

⁶³ Later on Sarayu points out, *"...you won't find the word 'responsibility' in the Scriptures."* (p. 205).

⁶⁴ pp. 204-205

⁶⁵ Why are we told in Scripture not to grieve the Spirit of God (Eph. 4:30)?

What would I say to someone in Mack's situation?

The Great Sadness that defines Mack's life is the real experience of many people. I think one of the reasons this book has been so popular is that people relate to Mack. They relate to his questions and to his feelings.

As I thought about how to conclude this review, I decided it would be appropriate to think through what I would say to someone in Mack's situation. Better yet, what does *the Bible* say to Mack? I pray that by God's grace I can communicate with tenderness, compassion, and truth some of what God's message is to Mack, as revealed in his living Word.

The first thing I would say is that the gospel is not just a *healing* power. It is a *saving* power (Romans 1:16). We are not just wounded innocents in need of healing, we are sinful rebels in need of saving. I have heard from more than one person, "*This book must be good, because it is bringing so much healing.*" But our most pressing need is not for healing, but for salvation. Don't misunderstand; I am not speaking against the real need for emotional healing. But all of the emotional pain and misery that is inflicted upon us is the product of our own forsaking of God, both as the human race, and as individuals. And when God brings emotional healing from that pain and misery, it is a blessing that flows from the gospel. Whether he is healing an emotional hurt in the heart of one of his children, or bringing a repentant sinner into the fold, it is the gospel that is at work in both cases.⁶⁶

So what is the biblical message of the gospel, and how does it help us deal with *The Great Sadnesses* in our lives?

Seeing our sinful hearts

Perhaps you have read this book and identify with Mack. In order to experience the *saving* power of the gospel which is the only power capable of bringing true emotional healing, you need to identify not just with Mack, but also with Missy's murderer and Mack's father. These characters portray the sinful human heart that is common to all of us.

In my Bible, I keep a list of verses next to Romans 3 that point me to my sinfulness.⁶⁷ One that I would like you to consider is Micah 7:2

*"The godly has perished from the earth,
and there is no one upright among mankind;
they all lie in wait for blood,
and each hunts the other with a net."*

Not only does this verse teach that not a single one of us is upright, it says something rather shocking about *all of us--they all lie in wait for blood*. God is showing us that to be a sinner means that, just as Missy's murderer, we too have a murderer's heart.

⁶⁶ One of the crying needs of the evangelical church today is that we as believers see that we need the saving power of the gospel just as much as the lost sinner does. The gospel is not just for "getting in." It is the power that sustains us daily. We should be preaching the gospel to ourselves everyday, especially when we are in situations like Mack's.

⁶⁷ In addition to what Romans 3 has to say about our sinfulness, I also have these verses listed in my Bible's margin: Job 35:9-10, Mic. 7:2, Psa. 143:2, Hos. 5:4, Psa. 14:2-3, 2 Chr. 6:36, Ecc. 7:20 (these are in the same order in which I discovered them in my daily Bible reading).

Do we really believe that apart from God's grace, we would commit murder? Do we really believe that we are capable of being the miserable father that Mack had? If you had to make a list of the five most gruesome and horrible sins possible, would you be able to look at that list and thank God for saving you from a heart that is not only *capable* of such things, but that *desires* to do them and *approves* of those who practice them (Romans 1:32)?⁶⁸

This is the clear teaching of Romans 3:10-18. Whether we are Jews or Gentiles, we are all "*under sin.*" And listen to what the description of that condition is, especially in the later verses:

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."

"Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

"Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known."

"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Of course we all know God-denying unbelievers who have died without ever "shedding blood" as Romans 3 says. But if the description of our sinful hearts that we read here is true, then the only explanation for this is that God has restrained these sinful impulses that are present in *all* of us.

I'm using murder as an example because it is the sin that is committed against Mack in the book, but you can plug in any wrong that has ever been committed against you. Has your husband or wife been unfaithful? You have the same adulterous heart. Have your parents abused you in some way? You have the same abusive heart.

No sinful act occurs apart from God allowing it

Consider another implication of this. If God graciously restrains us from being as sinful as we could be, this implies that he is capable of restraining any outbreak of sinful behavior wherever it occurs. This is why the Bible so often portrays both good and evil as coming from the Lord's hand.

Remember what Job said to his wife: "*Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?*" (Job 2:10).

I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things (Isaiah 45:7).

*Who has spoken and it came to pass,
unless the Lord has commanded it?*

*Is it not from the mouth of the Most High
that good and bad come? (Lamentations 3:37-38).⁶⁹*

⁶⁸ For an excellent explanation of God's grace in restraining us from the fullness of what our sinful hearts desire to do, see this section from Jonathan Edwards', *Men Naturally God's Enemies*: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.vi.i.vi.html>

⁶⁹ See also Amos 3:6; Gen. 50:20; 1 Chron. 21:1, 7 and many others.

So when God *doesn't* restrain the sins of others, he has a purpose in that. When, as these verses say, God brings evil things about, then he is working, "*according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*" (Ephesians 1:11). If Missy's murderer was not restrained, it was because God had a purpose in that.

For the believer, we have the wonderful promise that his purpose is always for our personal good. "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*" (Romans 8:28). For the unrepentant sinner, there is no such personal promise, but there is ultimate good that God will bring into his creation through his sovereign permitting of every instance of evil.⁷⁰

This should help us with feelings of bitterness toward God. First, there is nothing evil that happens that we as a human race did not bring on ourselves through our sinful rebellion. Second, God is enthroned in heaven over all, and there is not a single evil act that occurs without his permission. But his purposes are good, so we can trust him.

But what about bitterness and unforgiveness toward fellow human beings? The Bible has more to say about the basis upon which we can forgive those who have wronged us.

God already has, or eventually will, judge all sin

Scripture is crystal clear in presenting the justice of God.⁷¹ He does not leave the guilty unpunished. When God proclaimed to Moses his divine name, he communicated two essential truths about himself: that he is "*merciful and gracious...forgiving sin*" and that he, "*will by no means clear the guilty*" (Exodus 34:6-7).

All sin is either judged at the cross of Christ, or at the final judgment. Sin that is judged at the cross is forgiven. It has been eternally and finally punished in Christ. All sin that was not judged at the cross will not be forgiven, but will be punished by the second death in the Lake of Fire.

Consider what this implies for forgiving others. First of all, when we fail to forgive fellow Christians, we are being unjust. We are demanding repayment of a debt that has already been paid. On the other hand, when we fail to forgive unrepentant sinners who may never even ask us for forgiveness, we are putting ourselves in the place of God at the final judgment.

It is on this basis that Paul tells us in Romans 12 to bless our enemies. Part of his reasoning is that they will eventually be judged by God, and because we leave final judgment to him we are able to bless and forgive now those who wrong us.

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." (Romans 12:14, 19)

⁷⁰ By speaking of God's "permission", we can get the idea that God takes his hands off and lets things happen without his involvement, but God never ceases to be in complete control, even over evil. We only speak of his permission in order to communicate that God does not cause good and evil in the same way.

⁷¹ See the many scripture passages I have referenced in the preceding sections on sin and evil, and on God's love and justice. I won't repeat them all here.

Forgive as you have been forgiven

Another key biblical truth that both calls us and enables us to forgive is that which is expressed in Ephesians 4:32 *"Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, **as God in Christ forgave you.**"*

Each of us who are believers should reflect soberly on the fact that God was under no obligation to punish our sins at the cross rather than in hell. By his grace and mercy he chose to judge my sins at the cross. It could have been otherwise! God has not saved me and forgiven me because of *anything* I have done. When you realize that, and it really sinks in, it becomes a fountain of forgiveness toward others.

This is what Jesus was teaching with the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. Here Jesus answered Peter's question about how many times he should forgive his brother. Should he forgive 490 times? Jesus tells the story of a king who was owed 10,000 talents by one of his servants. Mercifully, the king forgave the debt, and the forgiven servant turned around, found someone who owed him 100 denarii (a fraction of what he had just been forgiven) and demanded payment.

Don't miss the fact that the 490 wrongs in Peter's question correspond to the 100 denarii in the story. In other words, no matter how grievously you have been wronged, or how many times you have been wronged, if you are a forgiven Christian, you have been forgiven a far greater debt than anyone else could ever owe you.

Jesus concludes his parable with sobering words. The unforgiving servant is handed over to the jailers until his entire debt is paid. And then Jesus says, *"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart"* (Matthew 18:35).

Remember that earlier in Matthew Jesus had said, *"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"* (Matthew 6:14-15).

In other words, the basis for forgiving others is that we have been forgiven. As the king in the parable says to the unforgiving servant: *"...should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?"* (Matthew 18:33). If we are unwilling to forgive others, then it is doubtful that we have truly understood the nature of God's forgiveness of us.

God has had mercy on us as Christians, and that not only obligates us to have mercy on others, it frees us to show mercy and forgiveness, even in the face of horrible offenses. The measure of our ability to forgive and be freed from past offenses is the greatness of God's forgiveness toward us. Only as we meditate on this and are given spiritual comprehension of it will we experience the emotional healing that comes as God empowers us to forgive offenses against us.

By now it should be abundantly clear why the gospel message should be at the center of any attempt to bring emotional healing to a hurting person. *The Great Sadness* can only be transformed into *The Eternal Joy* by the power of Christ's cross.

Conclusion

I have written this review for Christian brothers and sisters. And, sadly, I don't say that in a general way, but thinking of many personal friends who have encouraged me to read this book. Some of you are long-time friends. I love you all, but my love is first and foremost promised to the one who died on Calvary for me, and in the end I have written this for him.

Dear ones, if we want to encounter God, let us look for him where he invites us to find him, not in the shack, but in his inspired Word. God may not have left a note in your mailbox, but he has spoken to your fathers through the prophets, and he has spoken to us in these last days by his Son (Hebrews 1:1).

If we look to encounter him anywhere other than there, we will only be disappointed.