

The Shack Outline

(my comments are in bold/italics)

- ❖ Foreword (by Willie, a long-time friend of Mack)
 - Mack's history – Mackenzie Allen Phillips
 - Abusive father
 - When 13, Mack confided to a youth minister at his church. The minister told Mack's father, who tied him to a tree and beat him for two days.
 - *Can we be surprised at Mack's problem with the Church?*
 - Mack ran away and sent money home to Mom when he could.
 - Mack poisoned his father's alcohol bottles and believes that he probably killed him.
 - Married Nannette Samuelson (Nan)
 - They've been married 33 years
 - R.N. ~ works with terminal cancer patients
 - Speaks on helping people think through their relationship with God in the face of their own death
 - Five children
 - Jon – out of house
 - Tyler – recent college grad
 - Josh – attends community college (now)
 - Kate – attends community college (now)
 - Missy
 - Mack the character
 - Thinker and doer – not talker
 - 56 now
 - ◆ 7 years since Missy was taken
 - ◆ 3 years since the accident and hospitalization
 - Slightly overweight, balding, short, white guy
 - Smart

- Likes to talk about God (now) with people – interested in why people believe what they do
 - Dislikes “religion”
 - The Great Sadness – 7 years ago
- ❖ Chapter 1 – A Confluence of Paths
- Ice storm
 - Mack makes his way to mailbox
 - Finds a note from “Papa” about meeting him the next weekend at “the shack”
 - Mailman did not deliver it
 - Note uses Mack’s full name: Mackenzie
 - “Papa” is Nan’s favorite name for God, expressing her intimate relationship with God
- ❖ Chapter 2 – The Gathering Dark
- Mack’s *Great Sadness*
 - His nightmares
 - The story of Missy’s disappearance
 - Labor Day weekend camping trip
 - Mack with Josh, Kate, and Missy
 - Lake Wallowa in northeastern Oregon (“Little Switzerland”)
 - Mack reflects on just how much he really has in his family
 - Tale of the Indian Princess
 - A chief marries his daughter to a young warrior chief
 - Before the wedding feast can begin, a plague strikes the tribes, killing all the men
 - ◆ The plague can only be stopped if a pure and innocent daughter of a chief would voluntarily throw herself off a cliff
 - ◆ A dozen girls suggested, but the chiefs decide it is too high a price
 - But the engaged princess sneaks off and throws herself off the cliff, bringing salvation to the tribe
 - ◆ *Key here – her father did not know of her self-sacrifice. This is an important difference with the Jesus story.*

- ◆ *Missy wants to know why the Great Spirit is mean. Mack tells her that the Great Spirit (God) wasn't mean because both the princess and Jesus chose to die. How satisfying do you find this to be?*
- ◆ *How might this be a foreshadowing of Missy's murder? Whom might she be saving?*
- ◆ *Not addressed is the question of how the princess's death ends the plague. This is the ever-perplexing "how" question of atonement theology.*

❖ Chapter 3 - The Turning Point

- Mack and the kids meet two families, the Ducettes and the Madisons
- Over dinner, Mack reveals that he can't call God "Papa" because of his own father
- Mack goes to sleep that night with prayers of thanksgiving in his head
- The canoe accident
 - Josh and Kate are canoeing. Kate causes the canoe to flip. Mack dives in to save them.
 - Josh, though nearly drowning, is saved.
 - *What a massive sense of relief and joy Mack must have felt!*

❖ Chapter 4 - The Great Sadness

- After the rescue, Missy can't be found.
 - A search ensues
 - As Mack gets more worried, he prays and promises
 - *Isn't this our way? When desperate, we want to bargain with God.*
- Witnesses seem to have seen Missy being driven away from the campground.
 - APB goes out. FBI called in.
- A ladybug pin is found stuck into Missy's coloring book.
 - The pin is probably the calling card of the LittleLady killer. He's killed four little girls in four years. The five dots on the pin indicate that Missy is number 5.
 - No leads on the killer. No forensics. No bodies. . . .Only the pins.
 - *The images begin to flood in on Mack. How could any person ever deal with this? Could anything be worse? Really.*
- We are taken into Mack's Great Sadness.
 - The Madisons and Ducettes stay to help.

- Mack's prayers become simpler, no promises . . . just take care of Missy.
 - Mack is involved in every detail, knowing everything.
 - They find the shack.
 - In it, Mack must identify Missy's "torn and blood-soaked dress."
 - *It just got worse.*
 - The family tries to go on.
 - Mack tries to cope, to still be a husband and father.
 - Kate seems the most affected - withdrawing into a shell, a fortress that Nan and Mack can't penetrate.
 - Nan doesn't blame Mack in the least, but he blames himself
 - The inescapable *if-only* games.
 - Three and a half years pass. We return to the note in the mailbox.
 - Could it be the killer's taunts?
 - The Shack is the "icon of Mack's deepest pain."
 - Mack finds himself at least a little open to the possibility that it is from God, despite his having been taught that God now speaks only through the pages of the Bible.
 - ◆ *Would we be open? What have we been taught about God's talking now?*
- What is the Bible?*
- ❖ Chapter 5 - Guess Who's Coming to Dinner
 - Are there beliefs that are neither rational nor irrational, but what we might call non-rational, beliefs that conform to the truth but transcend the rational, the logical?
 - Mack sees three possibilities for the note
 - From God
 - A cruel joke
 - The killer's sinister taunts
 - Mack makes plans to go the shack the next weekend.
 - He rationalizes keeping it a secret from Nan.
 - He was protecting her. . . . *Really?*

- Nan decides to go away for the weekend, with Josh and Kate, to see Nan's sister and brother-in-law, a psychologist. He might help with Kate.
- Mack needs to borrow Willie's jeep and ends up telling him about the trip and the note.
 - *Could, would, God write a note?*
 - Mack won't let Willie go with him, but agrees to take Willie's gun.
 - Willie can't believe that Mack didn't tell Nan what was going on.
- Willie wants to know what Mack thinks God looks like. How will Mack know God if he sees God?
 - Mack confesses that his image of God is pretty much that of Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* – an old, bearded white guy.
- Mack makes his way to the shack. The closer he gets, the harder it gets; the more loony Mack seems even to himself.
 - When he gets to the path leading to the shack, he almost can't go on, but takes a picture of Missy for strength and sticks his gun in his belt.
 - Mack's imagination runs away from him as he descends the path. Seeing shadows everywhere, he even pulls his gun out.
- Mack arrives at the deserted shack. The bloodstain is still visible on the floor.
 - He slumps to the floor and apologizes to Missy.
 - His anger grows, this time directed at God, who "wouldn't even let them find her and bury her."
 - His anger yields to pain, and as he challenges God, he wraps himself in the Great Sadness.
 - Thoughts of suicide come to mind as the blackness rolls in. Mack pushes those thoughts aside for the sake of this family.
 - He falls asleep with thoughts of Missy.
 - When Mack awakes with a start, he challenges God again and prepares to leave.
 - Mack tears up the note.
- As Mack makes the walk back to his car, suddenly everything changes and it is as if it is the spring, not the winter.
 - When he turns around, he sees that everything has been transformed.

- The shack is a beautiful log cabin on a pristine lake. Postcard perfect.
- Mack makes his way back to the shack, wondering how he should approach and address God.
 - The door is opened by a “large, beaming African-American woman”!!
 - She greets him with a bear-hug, like there is no more important thing she could be doing at that moment. She uses his full name. It is all just love, love, love.
 - ◆ She smells of his mother’s floral perfume.
 - *It is true that smells are the most direct gateway to our emotions.*
 - A small, Asian woman walks into the room.
 - She seems shimmery, ephemeral. Easier to see if you’re not really looking at her.
 - ◆ Her hair seems to be blowing in a breeze, though there is not one.
 - ◆ Mack’s eyes have to work to see her.
 - Using a make-up brush, she wipes the tears from Mack’s face. She collects tears.
 - The Mack meets a third person – a man who looks like a Middle Eastern laborer, tool belt and all.
 - Pleasant features but not a man who would stand out in a crowd.
- We have met the Trinitarian God
 - Papa, the large, black woman – also likes the name Elousia (Greek for “tenderness”)
 - Jesus – the middle-eastern man who likes to work with his hands
 - Sarayu – the Asian woman, who is the Spirit (the name is Indian for “sacred river”)
 - When Mack asks “Who is God?,” the response in unison: “I AM.”
- ❖ Chapter 6 – A Piece of π
 - Mack is left with Jesus and Sarayu, unsure of whether to follow Papa into the kitchen.
 - He feels obligated, but Jesus tells him to do what he *wants*.
 - *Are there ever times that we ought to feel obligated – such as attending worship even on a day that we don’t “want to.” Perhaps the obligation will lead to the desire.*
 - Mack does go to the kitchen
 - God (Papa) is listening to funk
 - We begin to learn that God is “especially fond” of everyone.

- ◆ *What is this meant to convey about God and about ourselves? Where do we each stand with God?*
- Mack's first conversation with God is about "Papa" – God and his own.
 - Mack doubts that God can be the papa he never had.
 - ◆ If God couldn't take care of Missy, how can God take care of Mack?
 - God doesn't provide an answer – only a desire for healing of Mack and of their relationship.
 - God has no "magic wand" (p.92) to wave over Mack and make it all better. "Life takes a bit of time and a lot of relationship."
 - ◆ *Almost a throw-away line in the book, but the entry point to BIG questions*
 - *If God is all-good and all-powerful, why doesn't God have a magic wand. Can't God do anything? Why not make things right!!!?*
 - *Historically, this has been the most lasting argument against the existence of a personal, all-powerful, and good God. One's thoughts on this are one's "theodicy."*
 - God tells Mack that getting "head" issues out of the way first makes the heart stuff easier to work on.
 - ◆ *The standard phrase is "faith seeking understanding," but I've come to believe that "understanding seeking faith" is actually just as or even more typical for people.*
 - God changes the subject to gender. God doesn't have one.
 - ◆ Mack, like many, people find it hard to conceive of God without gender. God is not Gandalf!
 - *Why does God appear to Mack as a woman, a black one at that?*
 - ◆ Mack wonders why "Father" and not "Mother" is the person of the trinity.
 - God tells him that God knew the world would be woefully short on fathering, not mothering.
 - *I love this answer. How true it is. How many more people have "father issues" than "mother issues."*
 - Next topic: free will and choice

- ◆ God says “I’m not interested in prisoners.” (p.94)
 - God then asks about the meaning of “freedom” and all the forces that impel us in one direction or another. How much “freedom” is there?
 - “Freedom is a process that happens inside a relationship with him [Jesus].”
 - *We are off to the theological races again!*
 - *Why would God not be interested in prisoners? Are you? Your answer to this will shape the rest of your theology.*
- Mack asks: “How can you really know I feel?” (referring to Missy).
 - ◆ The answer is the scars on Papa’s wrists – just as they would be on Jesus’ and Sarayu’s.
 - *And so we are brought to the cross.*
 - *What does it mean when Jesus cries out the opening phrases of Psalm 22? God forsake him?*
 - *What does it really mean to proclaim a God-Who-Suffers?*
 - *What sort of answer is this going to be for Mack’s big question – How could God let it happen to Missy?*
 - ◆ God says: “When all you can see is your pain, you lose sight of me.”
 - *When we feel separated from God, who has moved away?*
- God and Mack talk about a bird. “Living unloved,” God says, “is like a bird whose wings have been clipped.” It is the not the way we were made.
 - ◆ Pain clips our wings. We can even forget that we were made to fly.
- But . . . God and Mack are not alike. “I am who I am.” *[YHWH, the name that God reveals to Moses at the burning bush.]*
 - ◆ God is not simply the best version of ourselves.
 - *A very important theological point!! And a common mistake.*
- God is unlimited, unbounded. God exists in a full state of satisfaction. God wanted us to share in that, but we humans tossed that away. God has stepped in to put things right. (p.98)

- ◆ In the incarnation, God chose to embrace all the limitations of being fully human, like a bird choosing only to walk not fly.
- ◆ *How is this for an explanation of the incarnation and Paul's "kenosis" in Philippians 2?*
- Jesus' miracles
 - ◆ Not done out of his "God nature" but out of his human nature, fully trusting in God's life and power to be at work in him and through him.
 - ◆ *Here, (p. 100), we come to a passage where some Christians may find fault. How does Young's explanation strike you? Some may see this as diminishing Jesus' divinity, though I think that Young is striving to avoid that conclusion on the part of the reader.*
- Does the Trinity really matter (p.101)? What do we lose if we don't proclaim One God in Three Persons?
 - ◆ We lose God's inherent relationality – God is love. Love must have an object. God is inherently both lover and beloved, making all love possible.
 - *Here, Young is very Wesleyan. He begins his theology with this statement: "God is Love" (1 John). All of our understanding of God must begin somewhere. This is where Young begins and it will color all that follows.*
 - ◆ God says, "I cannot act apart from love."
 - *This takes us back to the big question – then how about Missy?*
 - ◆ Mack tells God that he is sorry that Jesus had to die.
 - God thanks Mack but says "we" aren't sorry at all. Jesus pops in and tells Mack he would have done it for one person.
- ❖ Chapter 7 – God on the Dock
 - In the kitchen, Jesus drops a bowl of batter
 - Jesus then washes Papa's feet
 - *This brings to mind Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. How is it similar? Different?*

- All this is an example to Mack of the fullness of love and the limitations of his own love.
- Mack doesn't see the point of talking to Papa and the others about his children. Don't they already know everything?
 - Sarayu says that yes, God knows, but God limits God's self for the sake of genuine relationship, setting aside what God knows. She uses the example of a parent who limits herself in order to be genuinely in relationship with her child.
 - *How does this strike you? Would God limit himself for the sake of genuine relationship? In what ways, might God limit himself?*
- Papa suggests a devotion time. Mack expects the "devotions" of his childhood, but gets something very different.
 - The devotion time is a time of loving affirmation and appreciation among the persons of the Trinity - "simple, warm, intimate, genuine" - "holy"
- Jesus and Mack make their way to the dock
 - Jesus tells Mack that "I am the best way any human can relate to Papa or Sarayu"
 - The names
 - Sarayu is the Holy Spirit - the name means "wind"
 - El-ousia means "God-who is truly real"
 - Jesus tells Mack that humanity is at the center of our love and purpose
 - *Is this an inappropriate elevation of humanity? Or is it the place that "God is love" takes us? After all, the Son of God did give his life for us?*
 - *How would we even know this? In the context of Scripture, I'd say this is pretty close.*
 - Mack is surprised that Jesus isn't better looking
 - *Why does Jesus' response sting Mack a bit? What are our "standards?" What are God's?*
 - *Jesus tells Mack that "being transcends appearance." Do you think that is really true? Do we live that way?*
 - Jesus tells Mack that his purpose from the beginning has been to "live in you and you in me"

- *There is hardly more puzzling language in the New Testament than the language about Christ living in us and us in Christ. It does seem so nebulous and unreal. The author grounds his understanding on a “very real dynamic and active union.”*
 - Finally, though Mack feels lost, Jesus tells him that he is not lost.
- ❖ Chapter 8 – A Breakfast of Champions
- Mack’s flying dream
 - He soars to the heavens in his dream but is yanked back into the mud by the Great Sadness.
 - *What do you think the dream is about? Why is it here?*
 - Mack is disoriented, but thinks to himself, “If God is here, why hadn’t he taken his nightmares away?”
 - *Again . . . why doesn’t the omnipotent, all-good God make things right?*
 - Mack wonders and wonders what is really going on.
 - When Papa comes out with breakfast, she is again listening to an artist she is “especially fond of.”
 - But Papa also tells Mack that God has no favorites – just is “especially fond of everyone.”
 - *There is no hierarchy when it comes to God’s love. If we can’t imagine this, it is because God is God and we are not.*
 - Does God get angry with us? Of course, Papa says. But Mack expects to have met a more wrathful, angry God. Accept what is, Papa says, don’t bring all sorts of “pre-conceptions.”
 - *What are our own expectations of God? We all have pre-conceptions of God’s nature? But where do they come from? Would we expect what Mack expects? How might God’s anger or wrath differ from our own? How about Jesus’ anger?*
 - Mack says, “Don’t you enjoy punishing those who disappoint you? Papa’s reply is, “I’m not who you think I am . . . I don’t need to punish people for sin . . . sin is its own punishment . . . It’s not my purpose to punish sin; it is God’s joy to cure it.”
 - *This is a big point. Do you think this squares with the biblical notion of “punishment.” Another way to say this would be that the punishment for sin, its*

deadly consequences, are “hardwired” into God’s creation. We’ll probably spend some time on this one!

- Mack sees the “simple beauty and intimacy” among Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu, and says he always thought there was a hierarchy with the Father being the boss. Papa says there they are in a circle of relationship not a hierarchy. Because each are “always looking out for the best, there is no need for it. A long discussion follows on authority, rules, laws, and hierarchy.
 - *Why do humans have hierarchy? Why do we crave it (and we do!)? Might hierarchy, rules, and authority be a concession to our brokenness/sinfulness? Do you think that there is hierarchy in the Trinity?*
- Papa points Mack to the “will to power and independence” as the matrix in which we operate but not in which we were created.
 - *This “will to power and independence” is another way of describing Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit. In the biblical picture, it can be seen as the root of all sin. But it is not the way we were created to be . . . sadly, we chose it and still do.*
- They have a long talk about all that Mack does not understand, how despite our choices, God’s larger purposes will be accomplished. At the end of the talk, God brings it back to the real question. Will Mack trust that God is good and trust God with what Mack cannot understand?
 - *In the end, this is the question for us all. But for far too many, we don’t trust God because we don’t really know God. That’s why all this “God-talk” is so important. Who is God? What is God really like? Is God truly good?*
- ❖ Chapter 9 - A Long Time Ago, in a Garden Far, Far Away
 - Sarayu takes Mack into her wild, complex, and beautiful garden
 - They work to clear a small plot in the garden.
 - Why has God’s good creation gone bad? Sarayu says that the humans, having taken the “ravaged path of independence” have taken creation down with them.
 - *Very Paul . . . see Romans 8*
 - Sometimes what seems bad to us has good purposes. Humans are too quick to label good and evil.

- They go on to talk about the Garden of Eden (real, not mythical) and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
 - Mack acknowledges that his judgments about what is good and what is evil is self-serving. He is the judge of it. And, of course, even those judgments will change over time.
 - Sarayu points out that if there is no standard of good outside ourselves (absolutes) then all notions of what is good or moral become only self-serving assertions.
 - *The author seems to say that the knowledge of good and evil isn't (1) the ability to make free choices or (2) knowing what God knows but, instead, is taking upon ourselves the privilege of making those judgments.*
 - Sarayu also says that by taking it on, the spiritual was separated from the physical.
 - *Another intriguing notion. Almost separating the cosmos into two realms: ours and God's kingdom. Restoration of the cosmos then becomes putting the two back together. How is this as a way to talk about the kingdom of God? The weakness of this approach (spiritual/physical) is that it implies that God's realm is non-physical, which is not the biblical depiction.*
 - Sarayu says "You must know me enough to trust me and rest in my inherent goodness."
 - *See the paragraph in the middle of p. 136. Why is it that we cannot live independently of God? Darkness is the absence of light. Evil is the absence of goodness. Death is the absence of life. God is light, goodness, and life.*
 - Sarayu says that the cancer or the job loss or even the death could be the good.
 - *I don't really get what the author means here. Or if I do, I disagree. God's victory over sin and death was just that . . . how can we speak of God's victory over the good . . . death may alleviate suffering, but it is still the enemy because it is the absence of life.*
- What about Missy, Mack asks? Didn't she have the right to be protected. Sarayu replies with: "Rights are where survivors go, so they don't have to work out relationships."
 - *We are very caught up in our "rights," but I think the author is correct. In a good marriage, what need do we really have for "rights?" Do you think that "rights" are a*

concession to brokenness? Do we cherish our “rights” because they protect us from hierarchy? Did Jesus hold on to his “rights?”

- Sarayu tells Mack that the garden in which they’ve been working, messy and beautiful, is his soul. Together, she and he have been working with a purpose in his heart.

- *What do you make of this?*

❖ Chapter 10 – Wade in the Water

- Mack heads to talk with Jesus in the workshop.

- Jesus is working on his latest project and suggests a walk.

- They head down to the dock, where Jesus expects Mack to walk across the lake with him!

- See Peter’s story at Matthew 14:22-35

- Mack has trouble stepping off the dock. Jesus tells him that the problem is Mack can’t let himself be just in the present.

- Jesus says that he dwells with us in the present and that our imagining of the future is usually built on fear. Jesus tells Mack that when Mack envisions the future, Jesus is rarely in the picture.

- *This is a good question for us, especially in these scary times. When we think about the future, is it a future with Jesus? Is he part of the picture in our minds?*

- Jesus tells Mack that the future we imagine isn’t real. It can’t be because things never turn out just as we imagined they would. Yet, we let that imagined future of fear control us.

- *This seems pretty self-evident. What do you think?*

- Jesus says to Mack that when we have too much imagined fear, allowing it even to control our lives, it is because we don’t really know, deep, deep down that God loves us?

- *What do you think about this? What do you think we ought to fear above all else? How can we come to really know God’s love for us?*

- But Mack does walk . . . all the way across the lake. When they arrive, Mack is staggered by the awesome beauty of it all.

- Jesus reflects on the damage done to the planet he created and the renewal that awaits it.

- Mack asks Jesus why he doesn't just fix it. Jesus replies that it would end the story prematurely.
- Jesus asks Mack if he has noticed that the King of Kings doesn't act the way earthly kings do. Jesus doesn't force anyone . . . "to force my will on you is exactly what love does not do."
 - *Given what's come before, we are not surprised at this emphasis on free will. For the author, freedom is simply necessary for there to be genuine love.*
- Jesus then gets into "submission" – a heated topic in some Christian circles. Jesus says the Trinity are submitted to each other and they are submitted to Mack, that submission is all about love and relationships. Submission is "the most natural expression of my character and nature, and it will be the most natural expression of your new nature within relationships."
 - *What do you think the author is really getting at here? The dictionary definition is "to yield to the authority or will of another." Do you think that this is what the author has in mind? What if both persons in the relationship have the same will – want to do the same thing – like the persons of the Trinity? But if that's case, of what use is the word "submit." In all, I think this is a bit muddled.*
- Jesus tells Mack that women are better at relationships than men, because men find fulfillment in achievement. Men express their independence from God by turning to the "sweat of their brow" but women expressed their independence by turning from God to men. (see p. 146-148!)
 - *Do you agree with the author? What are the implications of this view? Do think this is the author's explanation for why women are better than men at relationship. How many problems in marriages result from our unwillingness to simply acknowledge some of the differences between men and women and then extend some grace to each other?*
- Jesus tells Mack that God created men and women to be equal and complementary. That woman was "birthed from man" (the story of Adam's rib) so that men could be birthed from women, creating a circle of relationship. This is why Jesus came as a man.

- *The author spends a good bit of time on all this about men and women. I'm not sure I understand exactly what the author is trying to say; e.g., how does Jesus' gender complete a circle. What do you make of all this?*
- Jesus tells Mack that he can neither “do” love nor “do” submission on his own, apart from Jesus' life in him. It isn't as easy as simply asking “What would Jesus do?” Jesus says then “seriously, my life was not meant to be an example to copy. Being my follower is not trying to ‘be like Jesus,’ it means for your independence to be killed.” Our union with Christ is what Sarayu meant by daily dyings.
- *Yikes . . . I have to say that some of this seems pretty off-the-mark, or at least throwing out the baby the bathwater. Seeking Christlikeness, the imitation of Christ, discipleship, and so on all seem to go out the window. For example, Paul says, “You became imitators of us and the Lord . . .” (1 Thess. 1:6). Do you think that the author is merely critiquing all our “Jesus-doings” while we cling to our independence? How might we better express this?*
- ❖ Chapter 11 - Here Come Da Judge
 - Jesus sends Mack back. But he soon reaches an impasse, but pushes through a wall behind a waterfall, and finds himself in the middle of an open blackness, broken only by a circle of radiance that surrounds him. There is a desk and behind him an Hispanic-looking woman who is the essence of beauty. Even the sound of her voice is like that of a rainbow.
 - She engages Mack in a conversation about how he loves his children and she knows that he does, and that he loves them well. She asks which child he loves the most.
 - Mack says he loves them equally, though differently. He is “especially fond” of each one. Their bad behavior doesn't affect his love for them.
 - She says that it isn't love that grows, but our knowing . . . “love is just the skin of knowing.” She says that Mack loves his children much the way the Father loves his.
 - *A biblical caveat here. From the biblical perspective, all humans are created by God and made in God's image. His “children” are his people – those who know and worship God; more specifically, those who have faith in Christ.*

- Mack expresses his anger at God. How could God really love her and then let her be murdered. The woman invites Mack to sit in her chair – it is time for judgment. Mack now thinks he has died. Mack thinks that he is about to be judged, but he is to be the judge!
 - Mack says he isn't the one to judge, but she points out that he does it all the time, in ways big and small.
 - Mack is to judge God and the human race. She forces Mack to confront the truth that he judges both God and humans. When he blames God for Missy's murder, he is acting as God's judge.
 - *For most of human history, we knew that we were the ones in the dock, that God was the judge. But in the last 150 years, we increasingly insist on putting God in the dock, with ourselves the judge of God.*
- Then, she tells Mack that he must choose two of his children to spend eternity with God and the three who will not. Mack, of course, knows that he can't condemn any of his children to "hell." He even volunteers to go in their place. She tells him that he sounds a lot like Jesus.
 - *I guess the implied question here is whether could God condemn one of those whom God loves . . . and is there anyone whom God does not love? How might this line of thought begin to change some of our understanding of eternal punishment?*
 - And still the question remains . . . why Missy? Why did she have to die? For what?
 - *Perhaps so long as we insist that Missy died for some reason, some larger purpose, we can't help but end up with a "God" who isn't much like Jesus. Mack admits that he sees Jesus' love, but can't square that with his "God."*
 - The woman tells Mack that the answer is to stop judging God and simply embrace God.
- Then, through the wall Mack sees his children – all five, even Missy. They are playing on the other side of the waterfall. In a way, Missy sees Mack and mouths the words: "It's ok . . . I love you." Missy is really there, the woman says, but for the children, it will be a dream.

- *What do you think is the purpose of this scene? Is it a glimpse into God's kingdom, the most real "reality" that exists alongside our own? Is the waterfall then a window into God's kingdom?*
- Mack sees Missy run and jump into Jesus' arms and then the "window" closes.
 - Mack asks the woman. If Missy has forgiven them the woman points out to him that he has nothing for which to be forgiven. Only Mack, blames himself for Missy's murder.
- The woman tells him that "judgment is not about destruction, but about setting things right."
 - *Do you agree with this? Is judgment a way of speaking of the triumph of God's mercy and justice? After all, what is judgment if it isn't the triumph of justice? And what is justice, if it isn't the making right of all wrongs?*
- ❖ Chapter 12 - In the Belly of the Beast
 - As Mack leaves the waterfall, he again encounters Jesus, who is skipping stones across the water. Jesus asks Mack if he enjoyed his time with Sophia. Sophia is the name of the woman that Mack met behind the waterfall.
 - *"Sophia" is the Old Testament name for the personification of God's wisdom. It is one of the ways in which the Old Testament depicts God's presence and work among us. You are not too far off if you think of "Sophia" as a name for the Holy Spirit.*
 - Mack is surprised to learn how little time elapsed while he was behind the waterfall. Jesus tells him that with Sarayu, time presents no boundaries.
 - *This seems to be a way by saying that God exists outside time and can enter into time and move within time as God needs, to accomplish God's purposes.*
 - Mack wants to know how "real" was the time with the children and Jesus at the waterfall. Jesus tells Mack that it was "very much real, far more real than life as you've known it."
 - *Here, we are again reminded that the kingdom of God is quite real. Whether you call it the kingdom of God or heaven or God's realm, it is the most real reality.*
 - Mack then wants to know more about Missy after she was taken. How did she feel? Was she terrified? Was she alone? Did she feel abandoned? Jesus tells him that she was never alone. After Missy got over her shock, Sarayu wrapped herself around the six-year old and Missy settled down. There was a long ride that gave Missy and God a chance to talk. Missy

prayed for Mack and for his peace. It is all overwhelming for Mack, and he breaks down into tears.

- Mack and Jesus then head back across the lake and Mack thanks them for talking about Missy.
- They then talk about all of the fears and lies and regrets that we tend to locked deep within ourselves.
 - It is only in genuine, loving, trusting relationships with God and with one another that we can be safe enough to release all of our secrets and lies.
- Mack then asks Jesus if he got a glimpse into Heaven back at the waterfall. Jesus tells him "our final destiny is not the picture of Heaven that you have stuck in your head."
 - Mack asks him, "what about all the pearly gates and gold stuff?" Jesus tells him that those images are pictures of Jesus and "the woman I'm in love with . . . It is a picture of my bride, the church: individuals who together form a spiritual city with the living river flowing through the middle, and on both shores trees grow with fruit that will heal the hurt and sorrows of the nation. And this city is always open, and each gate into it is made of a single pearl . . . that would be me!"
 - *This image of the church is taken from the closing chapters of Revelation. Not all would agree that the image of the "new Jerusalem" is an image of the Church, the body of Christ.*
 - *What images of heaven do you treasure? How are they connected to this world? How do you see yourself there?*
- Mack and Jesus then get into a long discussion about the Church (the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers) and the institutional church, which some would call "religion." For the author, it's only about relationships, never about institutions or organizations. Jesus says, for example, "I don't create institutions... never have, never will." The author lumps together religion, politics, and economics.
 - *What is left in this conversation for a church such as St. Andrew? For the Methodist church? For any church? Do you think the author is urging us to be "unchurched followers of Jesus?"*

- *What would you make of this statement: "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the church."*
 - *This discussion goes on for a long time, relationships versus institutions. And it's certainly appropriate to be reminded of what God really wants from us and hopes for us. But it's also true that in Romans 13, for example, Paul speaks to institutions that have been created by God. The classical interpretation is that God has created institutions and organizations to help us make our way forward through a world marred by sin. It is probably true that in the kingdom of God there will be no need for such institutions or organizations, but until the consummation of the kingdom, institutions and organizations are necessary and inescapable. The question is how we use them . . . and how we prevent them from using us.*
 - *It is certainly true that religious institutions and organizations have been much misused and abused. But by helping us to work together, to live together, and to love one another, many institutions and organizations, such as St. Andrew, have been an important and useful part of being God's people. In this world. Here again, I think that sometimes the author is inclined to "throw out the baby with the bathwater."*
- Mack tells Jesus that, sitting there on the dock with him, none of this seems that hard. But when he thinks about his "regular life back home," it just seems pretty overwhelming. Mack doesn't know how we could possibly change it all.
- Jesus tells Mack that this isn't his work, that it is Sarayu's task, that the whole thing is a process, not an event. "All I want from you," Jesus says, "is to trust me with what little you can, and grow in loving people around you with the same love that I share with you. It's not your job to change them, or to convince them. You are free to love without an agenda."
 - *Certainly, our growing in holiness is a process. Christians have often called this process, "sanctification." But this has always been seen as a cooperative effort, our effort and God's effort. That makes it different from salvation, which has always been understood to be God's work alone. However, sometimes I think that we draw a clearer line between "sanctification" and "salvation" than the Bible does.*

For example, Paul tells the Philippians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (2:12).

- In closing, Jesus tells Mack, "Those who love me come from every system that exists . . . I have no desire to make them Christian. But I do want to join them in their transformation into sons and daughters of my Papa, into my brothers and sisters, into my Beloved." Mack asks if that means all roads lead to Jesus. Jesus answers, no, most roads don't lead anywhere, but Jesus will travel any road to find us.
 - *How does this strike you? I suspect that this is a passage in which some people find a "universalist" message. Universalism is the belief that all people will be saved. For most Christians, this doctrine lies outside the bounds of the Christian faith.*
 - *However, I don't think that is the point the author is trying to make or a doctrine that he is trying to put forward. I think it is simply more of the author's issues with the institutional religion called "Christianity." I do come across people who say that they are followers of Jesus, but not Christians. I suspect they have the same issues in mind.*

❖ Chapter 13 - A Meeting of Hearts

- Mack returned to the kitchen to talk with Papa and enjoy some of her good cooking. They talk about Nana and Missy for a moment. Then Mack asks about Missy's story of the princess and the waterfall. Mack suggests that perhaps Missy died so that God could change Mack.
 - Papa stops Mack right there. "Don't ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I needed it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me."
 - *The theology here is that God doesn't cause bad acts, but that God uses even those bad acts for good purposes. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (8:28).*
- Mack then tells Papa that he always like Jesus better. Papa replies, "He came to show people who I am and most folks only believe it about him. They still play us off like good cop/bad cop most of the time, especially the religious folk."

- *How true do you think this is? Have you also had difficulty embracing the notion that Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God? Why do you think this seems to be so hard for many people?*
- *All Scripture has to be read in the light of Christ. Scripture portrays an unfolding revelation of who God really is, culminating in Christ. Hence, we shouldn't be surprised that Jews and Christians will sometimes read the Old Testament differently.*
- Just as Jesus and Mack talked about secrets and lies, so now, do Papa and Mack. Papa tells Mack that she doesn't wonder what Mack will do or what choices Mack will make, for she simply knows and is relentless in her pursuit of Mack.
 - Papa tells Mack that his lies are like a little fortress, inside of which he can feel safe and powerful. The walls of the fortress are the justifications he makes for his lies. Of course, Mack, we know, didn't tell Nan about the note from Papa. Papa helps him to realize that he didn't keep the note secret to protect Nan, but to protect himself. In so doing, Mack might well have Nan from coming to the shack with him.
 - Papa tells Mack that he needs to come clean with Nan and ask for forgiveness. And when he messes up again, to ask for forgiveness again . . . forgiveness is a process. "What if she doesn't forgive?," Mack asks. Papa replies, "That is the risk of faith. Faith does not grow in the house of the certainty."
 - *The best synonym for "faith" is "trust" and the building of trust is always a process. It can never be forced or purchased.*
- Mack asks, "So you use pain to force people back to you?" Papa forgives him for even thinking that.
 - *Many Christians cling to notions that God forces people to do things, even to believe or to love. But this is simply misguided – if God's ultimate goal is love, force can have no role.*
- After again telling Mack that evil acts come with the freedom and the ensuing independence, we were given, Mack admits that it is all so hard to understand.
 - *What do you think is most difficult for Mack to grasp about the nature of God's love and what it means for this world and our lives with God?*

- Papa's answer is that Mack, and we, have too small a view of what it means to be human. "You and this creation are incredible, whether you understand that or not. You are wonderful beyond imagination. Just because you make horrendous and destructive choices does not mean you deserve less respect for what you inherently are ~ the pinnacle of my creation and the center of my affection."
 - *We often talk about our making God too small, but how about this? Do we stop to consider the possibility that God lets this world, with all its tragedies and evils, roll forward because of all the joy, beauty, and goodness of life and relationship?*
- Mack asks, "What exactly did Jesus accomplish by dying?" Papa replies "Oh, nothing much. Just the substance of everything that love purposed from before the foundations of creation."
 - Papa goes on . . . Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God is now fully reconciled to the world, even to those who have not come to put their faith in God. But, reconciliation is a two-way street. Papa has done her 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."

❖ Chapter 14 – Verbs and Other Freedoms

- Mack, at peace, takes the canoe out on the lake and is surprised by Sarayu, who appears to him in the boat. He wants to know where she's been and her answer is, "I am always with you."
 - *Just because we feel distant from God does not mean that we actually are. God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, is with us at all times and in all things. If we really believed this and acted like we did, how would we change our living?*
- Sarayu and Mack then talk about learning to hear God's voice. We make mistakes but we will get better as we grow in our relationship with God.
- Mack admits he is afraid of emotions, asking, "Did you create all of them or only the good ones?" Sarayu says that emotions are the color of the souls: *paradigms (what we believe) power perception and perceptions power emotions*. If your perceptions are false then the emotional response will be too. Check your paradigms and your perceptions.

- *Do you agree with this? Do you think this highlights the need to strive to hold truthful paradigms – i.e., belief pyramids that correspond to reality? What if you believe that there is no such thing as “truth”?*
- But what about Scripture and its “rules,” Mack asks? Sarayu says the Bible isn’t about rules, it is a “picture of Jesus.” Rules are just less messy, easier, than relationships.
 - *True . . . true . . . true. So often Christians will make the mistake of trying to turn the Bible into a book of rules or a book of good behavior. But it is, instead, a book of stories. When properly understood, the Law is simply what love would do.*
- Sarayu goes on – it isn’t about having the “right answers,” but coming to embrace and trust the living answer.
 - *Also true . . . we want to have “right answers” and “true paradigms” but unless we are living with and in the living answer, we are nowhere.*
- Mack asks if he’ll see Sarayu again. She tells him that she will speak in lots of places and people. Her ability to communicate is limitless.
 - *In Philippians 4, Paul writes: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”*
- Mack gets back to the shack and heads for the kitchen to eat with the Three. Why do they eat? To be with Mack, not because they need to eat – they don’t need anything. They simply like to cook and it tastes good!
 - *God is self-sufficient. Desiring a loving relationship with us is not the same as needing it.*
- Mack’s mind races and then he realizes they know what he has been thinking.
 - *From Romans 8 (The Message): “Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God’s Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don’t know how or what to pray, it doesn’t matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans.”*

- “Why do you love us humans,” Mack asks? Do they feel fulfilled, as Mack does by his relationship with this children.
 - No, Papa says. God doesn’t need or seek fulfillment. Mack isn’t to think that God is human in God’s nature, though God is truly human in Jesus. Mack admits the whole thing turns his mind to mush! (*How true for us all.*)
 - *The author again wrestles with describing the Trinity and Jesus’ two natures. I think the big point he is making here again is that God is not simply the best version of our selves.*
- The conversation turns back to the Law. When viewed as a bunch of rules to obey, it is insufficient, it can’t get the job done. God asks, “How many do you think lived righteously enough to enter into our good graces?” Mack says, “Not many” . . . but the answer is one: Jesus.
 - Why the Law then? To reveal our filth, our sin. Jesus fulfilled the law (*kept the covenant*) for us. The law becomes a promise to us fulfilled by God.
 - *Jesus is our representative Messiah, his faithfulness to the covenant becomes our own and in this lies our salvation. God’s promise to us is that one day, we too will love God and neighbor every day and in every way.*
 - *This entire section on the Law is good (p. 203). We hold onto the rules because we think they bring us power and control. We are to live in Christ – a life of loving God and neighbor. Grasping this helps us to understand Jesus when he said, “I have come not to abolish the law [what love does], but to fulfill it.”*
- God is a verb, Sarayu says. God’s name, I AM, is based on a verb of being. God is alive, dynamic, ever active.
 - *It is God who turns the universe from a bunch of dead mass into a place that sustains and creates life. It is God who gives the cosmos its “being.” The question for those who deny the existence of a creator is this: “How did the primeval soup take life?”*
- Sarayu goes on: it isn’t about responsibility and expectation, but response and expectancy.
 - Sarayu uses the example of good friends who have an expectancy of the joy that will come from being together. But if the “expecting” turns into expectations, the relationship becomes dead and lifeless.

- *I'm not sure I fully grasp the author's point here. But ask yourself this, have you ever found that your relationship with someone was harmed by expectations they laid on you? As Sarayu puts it, expectations turn the living friendship into rules and requirements.*
- Sarayu says: "Responsibilities and expectations are the basis of guilt, shame, and judgment."
 - *What do you think? Can you ever think of a time when you felt like someone, even someone you love, was trying to get you to meet their expectations by using guilt?*
 - *I think the author is trying paint a portrait here of what a life lived fully and completely with God would be like. I imagine it is like living with God and others as Jesus did. Do you think Jesus ever put expectations on someone? Or responsibilities?*
- Sarayu says that God doesn't want to be at the top of our priorities pyramid, for then God is still only a part. Rather, if we conceive of our lives as a swirling mobile, then God wants to be at the center.
 - *What do you make of this? What do you think the author means by contrasting a pyramid with a mobile?*
- Finally, Sarayu tells Mack that she is going to give him a gift, to help him see just a bit of what God sees.
 - *This ought to be good!*
- ❖ Chapter 15 - A Festival of Friends
 - With this chapter, we begin to leave the "theology topics" behind. When Mack opens his eyes to see a bit as God sees, he is overwhelmed by a blinding, thrilling, swirling, bewildering cacophony of color and light. Children, adults, angels, animal, he sees them all, as well as rainbows of color that connect them. But there is one bit that is "wrong." One man seems out of harmony - it is Mack's father, whom Mack races to embraces, pouring out his sorrow and his love. The scene then centers on Jesus.

- *How did this scene make you feel? How would you describe it so someone? What about the point made that no two relationships are exactly alike because we are all unique. Do you agree?*
- *To me, this is an imaginative depiction of reconciliation. If we remember that the ultimate goal of God's entire rescue project is about reconciling us to him, then perhaps this scene elevates properly the need for and power of reconciliation.*

❖ Chapter 16 – A Morning of Sorrows

- After sleeping, Mack is awakened by a man – gray hair, pony tail, wiry, tall. It is Papa.
 - Why a man now? Because Mack is going to need a father.
 - *I can't help but wonder if the book would have been better received in some quarters if Papa had always looked like Willie Nelson!*
- Jesus, Papa, and Sarayu await Mack in the kitchen. Sarayu is carrying an aromatic bundle filled with what she and Mack had picked in the garden the day before.
- Papa and Mack head off on their hike, after Mack again comments on how much Papa loves Jesus.
- They talk as they hike.
 - Papa tells Mack that when Mack forgave his father the day before, it enabled Mack to know better God as Father.
 - Though Papa knew that humanity would rebel, Papa also knew what it would cost God to put things right. Could God have prevented what happened to Missy? Yes, Papa says.
 - How? By not creating at all. Or by interfering in her circumstance, which wasn't an option for purposes Mack can't possibly understand now.
 - ◆ *In the end, Mack never gets an answer to why God failed to intervene to prevent Missy's murder. As always, the last question on the table is this" Will I trust God?*
 - God didn't purpose Missy's death, but God can use it for good.
 - Does Mack trust Papa?
 - ◆ "I do trust you!" is Mack's reply.

- As they near the destination – whatever it is – Papa tells Mack there is one more thing that darkens Mack’s heart. Mack knows what it is – he can’t forgive the Ladykiller. Papa and Mack embark on a long talk about forgiveness.
 - Mack needs to forgive the killer so God can redeem him. Forgiveness is not about forgetting, it is about “letting go of another person’s throat.” Does forgiveness make everything ok? No . . . forgiveness doesn’t establish relationship. God has forgiven everyone but that doesn’t mean they have chosen relationship. Forgiveness is first for the forgiver – without it, the pain destroys joy and our ability to love fully. The killer doesn’t care about Mack’s pain.
 - Forgiveness doesn’t mean forgetting. It makes repentance and reconciliation possible but only that. Without genuine change (repentance), real relationship cannot be established.
 - *This is perhaps the key lesson to learn about forgiveness. It doesn’t make everything all right. But without it, “rightness” is simply not possible.*
 - Forgiveness doesn’t mean we should trust that person. But we might be surprised by what happens after we forgive – perhaps even the miracle of fully restored trust.
 - *Never underestimate the power of forgiveness. Nor how difficult it can be truly forgive.*
 - Forgiveness doesn’t excuse anyone nor mean they are “getting away free.”
- Papa then tells Mack that Missy has forgiven her killer. How? By the power of God alone.
 - Mack then strives to forgive – saying it over and over until it begins to take hold. Papa tells Mack that he’ll have to keep forgiving in this way – often and each day – until one day, Mack realizes that he has forgiven completely.
 - *How many times might we have to forgive until it is genuine and transforming? How about seventy times seven!*
- Then Papa reveals that they have come to take Missy home. All Mack can say is “Thank you.”
 - Mack realizes they are following the trail marked by the Ladykiller.

- They come to a cave entrance. Inside, they find Missy's body wrapped in a sheet. They gently wrap the aromatic flowers and herbs around her and prepare to carry her body home. As they leave the cave, Mack is gently saying "I forgive you . . . I forgive you."

❖ Chapter 17 - Choices of the Heart

- When Papa and Mack get back the shack, Jesus gently takes Missy's body from Mack and leads him to the workshop.
 - The project we've gotten hints about is Missy's coffin, carved with details of her life.
 - Jesus tells Mack that Missy helped pick out what would be carved into the coffin.
 - She will be buried in the garden that Sarayu and Mack had worked.
 - In the garden, Sarayu sings a song that Missy wrote. Sarayu pours on the grave the tears she had collected earlier from Mack. Sarayu lets fall a special tear that immediately blossoms into a tree.
 - It is a moving scene, and rightly, Mack tells Papa that he still hurts a lot over Missy's loss. Papa responds, "I know Mackenzie, I know."
 - ◆ *Notice that neither the beginnings of forgiveness nor the recovery of Missy's body make everything all right. It is all a process, a long and difficult process.*
- When they get back to the shack, Papa offers Mack a choice.
 - Mack can stay at the shack with them and with Missy or he can go back to Nan and his life.
 - Mack asks what Missy wants. Papa says she is where there is no impatience - she doesn't mind waiting.
 - Mack wants to know if he matters back home. Sarayu tells him that if anything matters, everything matters. Every time Mack forgives or reaches out, with every kindness or service he performs, God's purposes are accomplished.
 - ◆ *Again . . . we make humanity too small, we fail to grasp that the smallest kindnesses are bloomings of God's kingdom.*
 - Mack decides to go back confident that the Three and One will never abandon him.
 - Papa tells him that it is "a very good choice."
- There is one more thing. Sarayu tells him that Kate blames herself for Missy's murder. It seems so obvious to Mack that he can't believe the thought never occurred to him.

- *Why do you think that Mack couldn't see this for himself?*
- They finish up in the kitchen and then Mack sits on the floor where he falls asleep. When he awakens the cabin has returned to its old self and Mack heads out the jeep – to the “unreal world.”
- Mack is driving home, lost in thought, unsure what he'll say to anyone, even Nan, when there is a blinding crash and Mack's broken and unconscious body is careflighted to the hospital.
- ❖ Chapter 18 - Outbound Ripples
 - When Mack slowly begins to waken, he learns that he has been unconscious for four days. At first, his memory is a mess but when Willie visits him and asks him about the note, the weekend all comes flooding back. But . . . he wasn't there for the weekend, at least by the “unreal world's” reckoning. Mack's crash was Friday night, the same day he drove to the shack.
 - It is a nice moment when Willie presses to find out if God was there. Mack tells Willie that he has a message from God for Willie: God is especially fond of him.
 - *What if every person really believed that God is especially fond of them? Why is this so hard for us to truly know?*
 - Nan and Mack begin to go through Mack's story. Nan, of course, isn't really sure what to make of it. But Mack arranges for the two of them to be alone with Kate.
 - Mack tells Kate that she shouldn't blame herself, no one else does. Kate's unspoken guilt comes pouring out – and her healing begins.
 - Nan comes to believe Mack's story. And then Mack leads her and Tommy, the deputy sheriff, to Missy's body.
 - The forensics team finds enough information to lead them to the Ladykiller and to recover the bodies of the other four girls.
- ❖ After Words from Willie
 - Willie reflects on the profound transformation in Mack. *The Great Sadness* is gone. Mack now lives a life filled with joy and simplicity amidst his community of relationships.
 - Mack is testifying at the Ladykiller trial. He wants to visit with the killer, but hasn't been allowed yet.

- Willie is pretty sure that Mack and Nan still go to the shack now and then and wouldn't be surprised if Mack heads down to the dock and removes his shoes
 - *How satisfying do you find Young's ending for the book? What, if anything, would you have done differently? How true do you think the ending is to what has come before?*