

# **THE SHACK**

## **Study Guide©**

Rev. Galen W. Lowery

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*The Shack*, William P. Young, Windblown Media, Newbury Park, CA, 2007

# THE SHACK

## Study Guide

by

Rev. Galen W. Lowery

### INTRODUCTION:

This study guide was developed as a supplement to be used with the book The Shack by William P. Young. These questions can be discussed either in a group setting or reflected upon individually. It may be a good idea to pledge confidentiality if used and discussed in a group setting, since personal and sensitive issues may arise. As a person engages in dialogue, it is anticipated that other questions will emerge for further conversation and reflection.

In order for the greatest impact to be realized, it is recommended that the questions be reviewed prior to reading a particular chapter in the book. The questions constructed in this Study Guide were designed to promote discussion and cause a deeper grounding in a person's faith. The key point to remember is that The Shack is a work of "fiction" and not theological doctrine.

All Scripture references noted are from the New International Version of the Bible.

Chapter numbers and titles coincide with those used by William P. Young. Words which appear in "*italics*" within this study guide are direct quotes in The Shack.

"The author" as used in the study guide refers to Rev. Galen W. Lowery.

## FORWARD

1. Scripture says that we will have friends that stick closer than a brother (Proverbs 18:24). Willie was Mack's best friend. Who is one person in your life that is "closer than a brother?"
2. What are some of the qualities that make this person extra special and to whom you would share almost anything?
3. In the "forward" section we learn of Mack's intriguing past. What are some things that you remember about your past? What is the earliest event that you remember in your life?
4. Identify individuals who have been influential in developing your character.
5. In what ways have you been an influence in transforming someone else's life?
6. Write out other questions this section, "FORWARD," generated for you.

## CHAPTER 1 A CONFLUENCE OF PATHS

1. An ice storm in this chapter brought everything to a standstill. God may use nature, circumstances, events, and people to slow us down and reduce the busyness of our lives. Share some specific examples in your life when God decided that you were too busy. How did HE get your attention?
2. What are some of the causes or reasons as to why people get too busy and caught up in the “rat-race” of life? Have you ever realized that you might be “too busy?”
3. Is it possible for a person NOT to realize they are “too busy” in life? As a friend, would you tell a person that you thought they should “slow down?”
4. Mack goes to the mailbox during an intensive ice storm. As he returns to the house, Mack slips and falls on the ice resulting in a bleeding head injury. What do you think Mack learned from this experience and/or what advice would he likely give to others? Has anything of a similar nature happened to you?
5. Share an “ice-storm” (problems and things in life) that the Lord has given you. What did you learn?

## CHAPTER 2 THE GATHERING WORK

1. Mack told his daughter, Missy, a redemption story involving a maid and the sacrifice she made for the man she loved. In what ways have you made, or are making sacrifices for others?
2. Mack's daughters asked him questions involving the sacrifices of the Multnomah princess and Jesus dying on the cross. How would you explain "sacrifice" and Jesus' death on the cross to your children or to a Sunday School class?
3. In understanding human growth, development, and comprehension, at what age or when do you think it is appropriate to have conversations about Jesus' death on the cross and the significance it represents in our lives?
4. p.29 Mack "*...was a rich man, he thought to himself, in all the ways that mattered.*" However, Mack was not referring to material or financial wealth. What kinds of things or situations bring you the greatest joy, happiness, contentment and "richness?"
5. It has often been said, the person who asks the most questions usually learns the most. Write out some questions that you have asked God recently,

## CHAPTER 3 THE TIPPING POINT

1. p.34 *“As often happens, friendships had been struck up initially amongst the children and then between adults.”* What is the correlation with this statement, and rationale for such programs as VBS, Awanas, Pioneer Clubs, Youth Groups, Sunday School classes, and other programs designed to reach children initially?
2. The camping experience seemed to bring the father and children closer together. What kinds of experiences have brought your family closer together?
3. Mack reflects on some of the positive qualities of his wife, Nan. List positive qualities about your spouse, children, brother(s), sister(s), and/or parents.
4. Do you believe most people focus on the positive or negative qualities, habits, and traits of others? Why or why not?
5. p.18 Mack says *“...’life is hard sometimes, but I have a lot to be thankful for.”* For what are you thankful?
6. Identify Scriptures that command us to be thankful and to give thanks.
7. Before going to bed, Mack and his kids prayed. Why is it important to pray, and to teach our children to pray, not only at bedtime, but also at meals, and other times throughout the day?
8. Mack talks about Kate and her brother being “obedient” in wearing life jackets. As a parent, what are some of the ways we teach obedience? What Scriptures would you use in teaching obedience? Why is it important for our children to learn obedience? Sons and daughters, why is it important for you to “get under the authority” of your parents and be obedient? What Scriptures command children to do this?

## CHAPTER 4 THE GREAT SADNESS

1. p.53 Mack asks this question (in response to the disappearance of his daughter, Missy). *“God how could this happen?”* If you were Mack’s best friend, how would you respond to this question? What are some of the “HOW” and “WHY” questions you have asked God?
2. p.65 Mack uses the phrase *“...if only...”*. As a natural response, he blames himself for Missy’s disappearance. As a member of Mack and Nan’s church, how and in what ways could the congregation minister to the needs of this devastated family?
3. We have all heard of situations, events, and struggles that have widened the schism between a person and God. We have also witnessed tragedies that have brought people closer to God. What does this say about the need for a strong foundation in our faith and the need to develop relationships with other believers?
4. p.65 Mack says that in seminary he had been taught *“...that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture,...”* What are your thoughts? Do you agree or disagree? Are you able to identify Scripture supporting your posture?
5. There may be individuals reading this book who have experienced pain, tragedy, suffering, and loss of unprecedented proportions. If you are one of those persons, and with all of the sensitivity, sympathy, and compassion that can be extended, is there anything that you would care to share? What helped you the most? Are there additional ways others could help further minister to your needs as you continue your faith journey?
6. What do you consider to be the most important thing in your life? Explain.
7. Special agent Samantha Wikowsky tells Mack she knows how he feels after the abduction of his daughter, Missy. Should we tell people, “I know how you feel?”

1. Mack did not confide in Nan regarding the note he received from "papa." Mack also did not tell Nan of his desire to go to the shack and look for answers.

Spouses, are there things you do not share with each other? Why or why not? In terms of a healthy marriage relationship, do you feel that husbands and wives should keep things from each other?

Sons and daughters, are there things you feel unable to share with your parents? (Most teenagers will respond in the affirmative. Therefore, follow-up questions are asked.) What are some of the things you feel unable to share with your parents? Why? What would have to change in your relationship with your parents before you would feel comfortable in sharing with them?

2. p.71 Mack says, "*Maybe what happened to Missy is God's judgment for what I did to my own dad.*" Have you ever felt that God was punishing you for something you had done? Based on Scripture, do you believe that God sometimes disciplines us here on earth? Identify Scripture(s) that support your position. Sometimes "guilt" may be experienced. Why? How and when does "forgiveness" enter into this conversation?

3. Willie gave Mack a gun for protection against unknown elements that might be encountered at the shack. How does this resonate with your sense and need for protection, or self-defense? What other courses of action could Mack have pursued?

4. Willie loaned his jeep to Mack for the journey to the shack. When was the last time and what were the circumstances in which you helped a friend? If a person, whom you did not know, requested assistance, how would you respond? Would your response depend upon the type of assistance requested?

5. Can you relate to a time when you were at the "end of your rope" or "wits end" as the expressions goes, and you cried out for help like Mack did? Explain. Was help or relief forthcoming?

6. Mack felt alone and abandoned by God? Have you ever felt that God was "not around" when you needed HIM the most?

7. For a moment, Mack contemplated suicide. He thought this would be one way to strike back at God. However, what was it that caused him to dismiss taking his own life?

8. Mack experienced the presence of God. Have you had such a personal encounter?

1. Mack thought God had abandoned Jesus on the cross. Mack further felt God was absent during his personal pain and suffering at the loss of Missy. As a friend, how could you explain and provide assurances to someone that God IS ALWAYS with us?
2. What are your perceptions of God? How would you describe God to others?
3. Is it possible for God to love you more today than He did 2000 years ago? Defend your response.
4. God chose to reveal Himself in a very special way to Mack. Share some unique ways that God has revealed (and continues to reveal) Himself to you.
5. What were some of the things that you learned, or how were you challenged with this chapter?
6. If you were helping William P. Young edit this chapter for a revision of the book, what changes would you suggest for addition, deletion, or modification?
7. The concept of freedom and free will are mentioned in this chapter. What do those terms mean? Does an individual truly have “free will?”
8. We love, live, and learn through the physical “senses.” Since God is Spirit how do we perceive or know God?

## CHAPTER 7 GOD ON THE DOCK

1. As a meal was being prepared, a dish of food fell to the floor. The dish broke and splattered food all over the place. Laughter erupted while everyone assisted in cleaning up the mess and continued with the preparation of the meal. Describe the scene, emotion, and reactions, if this event would have happened at your house.
2. The Bible says God knows our thoughts and needs even before we ask. How does this line up with what the author writes on page 106?
3. Family devotions are mentioned on p. 107. Do you have family devotions? If not, would you be motivated to begin incorporating a time of meditation in your daily schedule? Identify some advantages of having family devotions.
4. Mack thought Jesus would look more athletic and handsome. However, this was not the case. What does this say or suggest about our appearance, physical features, and abilities?
5. During the reading of The Shack, the author of this study guide became very uncomfortable with Young's use of the word "papa" for God. Jesus refers to God as "Father" in many instances in Scripture. God is "HOLY." Should the Creator of the universe be reduced to the slang expression of "papa?" (Perhaps we need to remember that this book is "fiction.") However, were you uncomfortable with this word usage as well? Are there other things that troubled or concerned you?
6. p.114 Mack tells Jesus that he feels "*lost*." Jesus assures Mack that he is not lost and that Jesus is with him. Have you ever felt "lost" and alone? Identify Scripture that gives testimony to the fact that God will never leave us nor forsake us. (This is the third time that William P. Young mentions that Mack felt "alone", "lost", and perhaps "abandoned." The other two times were in Chapters 5 and 6.)

## CHAPTER 8 A BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

1. Mack wondered why God had not taken away the nightmares. If someone asked you that question, what would be an appropriate response?
  
2. p.120 William P. Young says “...*I (referring to God) 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.*” Engage in dialogue on this issue in view of your Biblical understanding.
  
3. p.122-124 William P. Young suggests there is no power or chain of command or authority structure and that everything is about true relationships. How is this concept contrary to the teaching of Scripture with regards to **authority structure** in the family, at work, government, and the church?
  
4. Why is it necessary to have a structure of authority? Is there an authority structure in heaven?
  
5. p.125 “*I (God) will use every choice you make for the ultimate good and the most loving outcome.*” Comment on Young's statement. Is this a Biblical truth? Use Scripture to support your answers.

## CHAPTER 9 A LONG TIME AGO, IN A GARDEN FAR, FAR AWAY

1. Mack asks Sarayu (Holy Spirit) about the poisonous plants and animals and why God would create “bad” things. The Spirit informed him that when these things were originally created, they were “good.” Is this your understanding of creation? Explain.
2. p.134 Young writes, *“When something happens to you, how do you determine whether it is good or evil?”* How would you answer that question? What is your basis for discerning what is good or evil?
3. Do the things we think are good or evil ever change with circumstances and/or time? In other words, are there any absolutes for all people for all time? If so, name some of them.
4. How are things determined to either be “good” or “evil?”
5. Sarayu was cleaning a mess in the garden. The Spirit said the “mess” was actually Mack’s soul which needed pruning and cleaning. Are there any “messes” within your life that need to be cleaned and eradicated? Would you care to share your response with others?
6. Share with the group some other questions this chapter raised for you.

## CHAPTER 10 WADE IN THE WATER

1. Jesus asked Mack if humans were designed to live in the past, present, or the future? What is your response to that question? Where do you spend or invest most of your time—past, present, or future?
2. What is “FEAR?” What makes a person “fearful” of something or someone?
3. Does the Christian have anything to “fear?”
4. How can “fear” be a positive quality in the life of a believer?
5. p.145 *“Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect.”* How does this compare with your understanding of Scripture and the principles of “submitting” to those in authority? (As you recall, Young also mentioned this piece on “authority” in chapter 8)

## CHAPTER 11 HERE COME DA JUDGE

1. Do we love people less when they misbehave or make poor choices? When individuals misbehave or make poor choices, what are some ways that we can encourage, uplift, and demonstrate a caring attitude?
2. The Holy Spirit talked to Mack about honesty and truth. Are there times when you are not honest and truthful with yourself? Are there times when you feel that it would be appropriate to withhold the “truth” from others? What is “truth?” (Note that William P. Young has talked about truth and honesty previously, and he will mention it again in Chapter 13)
3. The concept of “judging” was mentioned. Think about that term in your life. What are some of the things for which you offer judgment daily? Why do we judge?
4. Scripture commands us to “judge” in certain instances. Provide some examples.
5. Scripture also warns against “judging.” When are we NOT to judge?
6. When a tremendous loss is experienced, a person tends to blame someone for that loss. Eventually, God may be blamed. Why?
7. Mack is told evil exists in the world and people are not immune from it. Do you believe that God is in control of all that happens in the world and whatever happens to us, HE allows?

## CHAPTER 12 IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

1. In The Shack, Jesus tells Mack that he (Jesus) has been trying to catch a huge lake trout for weeks. However, in all of Scripture, Jesus never uses animals for pleasure or fun. In the Bible, animals are used to bring honor, glory, and to accomplish that which pleases the Lord. Where does Jesus invest most of His time in Scripture? What does this say about how, where, when, and in what ways we should be investing our time?
2. William P. Young asserts that our lives revolve around three structures—religion, politics, and economics. Can you think of other major structures, systems, ideologies, or institutions that control or have significant impact upon your life?
3. We need to find ways “to love” and “to serve” others more effectively. List ways that you can begin to “serve” and “love” more effectively in your own families, neighbors, and communities this week. Have you touched base with your pastor to learn how you might use your gifts, abilities, and talents to “serve” others in the church and in the community?
4. What is the greatest commandment in all of Scripture and where is it found? What is the second greatest commandment and where is it found in Scripture?
5. What does being a “Christian” mean? Does Scripture ever tell us to “make Christians?”
6. As Christians, what do you think our primary responsibilities are?

## CHAPTER 13 A MEETING OF THE HEARTS

1. How would you define “grace?”
2. Why do people lie? Do people always have a right to know the truth?
3. List some questions, reflections, or concerns that this chapter raised for you.
4. p.190 *“All evil flows from independence, and independence is your choice.”*  
Comment on that statement.
5. What is evil?
6. What is your understanding of the origin of evil? When does evil initially appear in Scripture?
7. Who is the author of “evil?”

## CHAPTER 14 VERBS AND OTHER FREEDOMS

1. When you are alone, perhaps in your automobile, at home, outdoors, in the garage, working, or at play, have you ever been known to sing, whistle, or hum a tune?
2. If you were in a recording studio, what song would you record? Why?
3. How have you learned to hear God?
4. p.197 William P. Young says *"The Bible doesn't teach you to follow rules."* What are your thoughts and reflections?
5. Why is it important to have "rules" in society?
6. Explain your understanding of what it means to be "free in Christ."
7. Identify further thoughts, questions, reflections, or ideas this chapter generated for you.

1. What Scripture supports the fact that each person has one or more angels?
2. In a special way, circumstance was made possible for Mack to see his father and daughter who had died. Why do you think a person would want to have conversation with someone who has died? Does this concept have a Scriptural basis?
3. Mack immediately asked his father for forgiveness. Who have you wronged and needed to go and ask forgiveness? Is forgiveness possible in all instances?
4. Locate the Scripture that talks about God not forgiving us if we do not forgive others.
5. What does it mean to “FORGIVE?” (Remember that forgiving someone does not mean to pretend that something did not happen)
6. Would you care to share a struggle or time when it was difficult to forgive someone. Perhaps you are engaged in an emotional battle within yourself at this very moment regarding the issue of forgiveness, and would like to share it with others.

## CHAPTER 16 A MORNING OF SORROWS

1. Has anyone wronged you to the extent or degree that you hated them and/or have not been able to forgive them?
2. God brings Mack “full circle” as the expression goes, to the man who killed Missy. In your own words, explain what you think God was trying to accomplish. If you have experienced a loss or tragedy similar to Mack’s, has this chapter been helpful?
3. To whom do you need to communicate Christ’s love?
4. p.227 Mack forgave the man who killed Missy. He asks God if it was all right to remain angry. William P. Young, writing for God, penned these words.  
*“Absolutely! What he did was terrible. He caused incredible pain to many. It was wrong, and anger is the right response to something that is so wrong. But don’t let the anger and pain and loss you feel prevent you from forgiving him...”*  
Verbalizing and sharing with someone could be a first step in the process of forgiveness. Is there anyone in your life with whom you are angry and that you would like to share circumstances as a point of release?
5. God tells Mack that tears can be “healing waters” and “streams of joy.” How can this be? Do “real men” cry?
6. Why do you think it was necessary for God to take Mack to the cave to find the remains of his daughter?
7. There are many unsolved homicides in our country today. Many criminals are never apprehended. Many individuals are brought to trial only to be “freed” due to a technicality, lack of evidence, or lack of legal protocol. Justice seems to be non-existent in far too many instances. Attention to the rights of the accused seems to outweigh the crime and the rights of the victim(s). Is it possible to extract justice in all circumstances? How do we make sense of all of these things?

**CHAPTER 17 CHOICES OF HEART**  
**CHAPTER 18 OUTBOUND RIPPLES**  
**AFTERWORDS**

These chapters are left to the reader to develop questions and thoughts for discussion. May each person find “their shack”—a place imagined or real where a person can go for answers. That “shack” may be some special place where one can get alone with God. That “shack” may be a local church filled with loving, forgiving, caring, and compassionate people who are living out their faith.

May the Lord bless your lives, your families, and your ministry of love and service to others. May others be added to the Kingdom because of your faithful witness and testimony of Jesus Christ. As each of you continue your spiritual pilgrimage and faith journey, may others see Jesus living in you.