

Missy's Question
January 4, 2009
Genesis 50:20, Genesis 22:1-2

“take your son ... and offer him...on the altar” Genesis 22:2

“Then how come he's so mean?”

“What do you mean Missy?”

“Well, the Great Spirit makes the princess jump off the cliff and makes Jesus die on the cross. That seems pretty mean to me.”

Mack... wasn't sure how to answer. *The Shack*, page 31.

This week we start a two-month series of sermons from the popular book, *The Shack*. The story of this book's phenomenal growth in popularity from self-published to a best-seller is amazing. Last summer I did something different in our reading schedule with our church staff's leadership team. Over the years, we have read several books together. I often purchase enough copies and then hand them out. We read and discuss significant insights and intriguing chapters. Some of our leadership team loves it. To be honest, some of the leadership team struggles merely to read the assigned chapters. Realizing that *The Shack* was becoming this amazing phenomenon, I bought enough copies to give to the leadership for summer reading. However, this time I did not make it an assigned reading. I told them it was simply my gift to them. If they wanted to read it, fine. If not, fine. No intention to hold assigned discussions, just read it if you want. Within a couple months, the leaders who normally don't enjoy assigned readings were back to me saying, “When do we get to discuss this?” They were purchasing copies for their own ministry teams.

Last fall the elders took up this book for their group reading and discussions. The discussions have been fantastic. Whether we like it or hate it, it forces us to think deeply about our faith. This book revolves around the difficult question about evil in our world. It involves the death of a child and how the father of the child deals with his grief in the midst of his anger and confusion toward God. The essential question of the book is Missy's question: How can a loving God allow so much suffering in our world?

As we start into this series of messages, you need to know that this is a controversial book in some churches. Several pastors have warned their congregations to stay away from it. You can go on line and google *The Shack* and catch YouTube portions of sermons where other pastors have told their people this book is heretical and Christians

should avoid it. We obviously do not agree with that approach. We encourage you to read the book for yourself. If you have read it already, you will likely want to go back to it again this winter as we work our way through some of the key insights and questions.

While you are googling, I suggest you look at “Willie’s Personal Journal.” This helps us understand some of where the author, William Paul Young, came from in his life that led to this writing book. He is the son of parents who were missionaries to a tribal people in Papua, New Guinea. In his very young pre-school years he assumed he was a member of the tribe. When it was time for him to start school, his parents moved back to Canada where his dad became a pastor.

William Paul Young, coming out of a childhood missions experience in a tribal culture, is very aware that the common way for missionaries to explain the gospel of Jesus is to look for a comparable tribal legend to which the story of Jesus’ death can be compared. This was an experimental approach tried in the mid-twentieth century. By the late twentieth century, this approach to Christian missions, comparing Jesus’ death to local tribal legends, had become a fairly common approach. I was in the mainstream of this approach to other cultures.

Thus, it made complete sense to me when *The Shack* has the father tell his young daughter Missy about the Indian legend of the princess who sacrificed herself to save her people. One of the first questions the author invites us to consider is whether using such legends is helpful for Christians to explain the sacrificial death of Jesus. A fellow pastor told me that he was so upset with this comparison of Jesus’ death to the Indian princess that he could barely read the rest of the book. For him it was a travesty of the doctrine of Christ’s atonement. My response was to wonder why this opening section of the book was creating such a big controversy. I would have used this approach among the Tlingets when we lived in their village.

Then I went back to read it a second time some months ago to begin preparing these sermons. This time, I was intrigued with a new thought. Are missionaries helping or hindering the Christian cause by using such tribal legends as a basis of comparison to Jesus’ death for us? Might this attempt to explain Jesus’ sacrificial death actually stir up the wrong response?

This week let’s explore the question we all find so hard to face, “Why does God allow evil?” Or in the words of seven-year-old Missy in the story of *The Shack*, “Why is he so mean?”

The Offering of Isaac

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

Genesis 22:1-2

This fall I started riding a moped to work. I sometimes wonder what others must think when they pass this white-haired old guy on his moped. I read about a young successful doctor who pulled up to a stop light next to an old geezer sitting on his moped. The geezer rapped on the window and asked the doctor, "What kind of car you got there sonny?" The doctor responded, "This is a Ferrari GTO. It cost half a million dollars." The geezer on his moped whistled in appreciation. "Why does it cost so much?" The doctor answered, "It can go over 200 miles per hour." The geezer is duly impressed. "Mind if I take a look inside?" The geezer leans in through the passenger window to look around. "Nice car. But I'll stick with my moped."

As the light turns green, the doctor decides to show off a little of what his car can do. He stomps on the gas and gets it up to seventy-five miles per hour. As he glances in his rear-view mirror to see how far back the old guy is, he spots the moped rider not just keeping up with him, but actually passing him. As the rider shoots by the doctor, the doctor hits the accelerator again passes the geezer at 100 miles per hour. A moment later the doctor sees the moped shoot past him again. Frustrated that this old guy is riding a moped as fast as his fancy car, the doctor pushes the limits and hits 200 miles an hour. To the doctor's astonishment, the moped is gaining on him again. As the doctor watches in his rear-view mirror, the geezer crashes his moped into the back of the car. The doctor slams on his breaks and rushes back, sure that the old guy must be dead. As the doctor leans down to check the old guy's pulse he hears a whisper, "Would you mind unhooking my suspenders from your side mirror?"

If there is any question that whips us around in our faith it is the common version of Missy's question: "Why does a good God allow evil?" When we see wars and famine, we wonder, "Why does a loving God allow this?" When we see natural disasters destroy thousands of homes along the gulf coast states, we wonder, "How can a loving God allow these things?" However, perhaps more than any other human suffering, the loss of a loved one too soon is the one that most often causes us to struggle with Missy's question. "Why is God so mean?"

The mother loses her child under the wheels of a drunk driver. We understand her cries of “Why, God, why?” The family loses a child to leukemia. “Where was your loving God?” asks the angry father to the hospital chaplain. For many of us the question of evil is more than merely an academic question. It gets personal really fast when we experience our own tragedy. Here is the truth: in such times, we find the simplistic doctrinal answers do not help at the level of our hearts.

I am thinking of the words a pastor said to me in the hospital lobby while our oldest teenaged son lay in a coma. “You know Bruce, God has a purpose for this.” You want to know the truth? I wanted to hit him. Of course, I believed this at the level of head knowledge. I knew that God could redeem any tragic situation into something good. But his words seemed trite and unhelpful at the time. Contrast his theology words with another pastor friend who just wrapped his arms around me and held as I let down and began to weep. No words, we just wept together. One gave me theology. The other gave me connection.

I suspect one of the major reasons for *The Shack*’s popularity is that it subtly, but effectively challenges the popular notion that our simplistic Christian theology has all the answers for the tragedies of life. “God loves you,” is a true statement, but is it helpful as the first line we share in the hospital as a family sits with their dying love one? “The Bible says it, I believe it” is not enough when my sister is dying of a brain aneurism. Our hearts yearn for something more.

Christianity has spun off three different approaches to the question of evil. On the one hand is the Deistic option that sees God as choosing to remain inactive in human history. God is like a clock-maker who builds the clock and starts it ticking, then steps away to let it run its course. God is good, but does not really care about us. If God doesn’t care about our pain and remains aloof, then our pain must not matter. We are nothing more than a cog in the wheel of the clock.

On the opposite side is the predestination theology that sees everything that happens as God’s intentional will. God meant this to happen and has a plan for it to fit into the overall message of the universe. If God planned each tragedy to come at exactly the moment it hits us, then we are nothing more than puppets in God’s big plan. If we are willing to challenge either of these explanations for evil, we are ready to enter fully into the story of *The Shack*.

The Shack is intended for people who are tired of the old images and doctrinal answers to the complex issues of evil. The author invites us to consider that God is indeed loving and good. What if our loving God has permissive will that allows evil? God does not plan evil things to happen, but stays close enough to be part of redeeming them into something good. Just as Joseph said to his brothers who sold him into slavery, "You meant it for evil against me, but God redeemed it into good."

Welcome to a novel of complexity. It offers artistic images in place of the simplistic doctrines that failed to answer the deepest questions of our hearts. It is a novel of imagination in place of simplistic, trite phrases. We may not agree with everything in the book, but we are intrigued that someone dares to suggest a more complex imagery to describe our relationship with God.

"Mack knew that he needed some answers. He realized he was stuck, and Sunday prayers and hymns weren't cutting it anymore, if they ever really had.... He was sick of God and God's religion... Mack wanted more." (p. 66)

Are you ready for a good read?