

Theological Musings from Dave's Laptop

October 24, 2017

I wrote about Paul Young's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Shack*, a month or so ago, right after Jill and I watched the movie.¹ Our DISCIPLESHIP Team hosted a screening of the film last Friday night, and we had a good group in attendance for that event.

Nearly every page of the book wrestles with deep theological realities, and the film does a pretty good job of surfacing these in the space of two hours or so.

The film offers a winsome approach to the mystery of the Trinity, a reality we know by experience but continually struggle to describe. The film emphasizes the significance of life in eternity as well as the "thinness" of the boundary between our present lives and eternal realities.



Wrestling throughout with the fundamental problem of how evil can exist if God is indeed both good and powerful, *The Shack* rightly points out that "it all goes back to God." While God doesn't make evil *actual*, God *has made* evil possible. One of my favorite lines in the theodicy offered by *The Shack* is God's comment that "**We are not justifying the evil in the world. We are redeeming it.**"²

And, given that, which seems to me to be true to Scripture, the novel pushes down until we reach the bedrock questions, "**Is God really Good?**" and "**Is God really Trustworthy?**" The answers you and I eventually give to those two questions will shape what life is like for us in this life and in the next.

One of the scenes that wrestles most clearly with these questions takes place in "the Cave of Judgment." What follows is that chapter from the book. It's kind of long, but I encourage you to read it carefully and ask yourself where you are in this story

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Mack followed the trail that wound past the waterfall, away from the lake, and through a dense patch of cedar trees. It took less than five minutes to reach an impasse. The path took him directly to a rock face, the faint outline of a door barely visible on the surface. Obviously he was meant to enter, so he hesitantly reached out and pushed. His hand simply penetrated the wall as if it weren't there. Mack continued to move cautiously forward until his entire body passed through what appeared to be the solid stone exterior of the mountain. It was thick black within and he could see nothing.

<sup>1</sup> William Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Windblown Media, 2007; film 2017).

<sup>2</sup> And we, too, have a part to play: "That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Taking a deep breath and with his hands outstretched in front of him, he ventured a couple of small steps into the inky darkness and stopped. Fear seized him as he tried to breathe, unsure whether or not to continue. As his stomach clenched he felt it again: The Great Sadness settling on his shoulders with its full weight, almost suffocating him. He desperately wanted to back out into the light, but in the end he believed that Jesus would not have sent him in here without a good purpose. He pressed in farther.

Slowly his eyes recovered from the shock of moving from daylight into such deep shadows, and a minute later they adjusted enough to make out a single passageway curving off to his left. As he followed it, the brightness at the entrance behind him faded and was replaced by a faint luminosity reflecting off the walls from somewhere ahead. Within a hundred feet, the tunnel turned abruptly to his left and Mack found himself standing at the edge of what he assumed was a huge cavern, although initially it seemed to be only a vast empty space.

The illusion was magnified by the only light present, a dim radiance that encircled him but dissipated within ten feet in every direction. Beyond that he could see nothing, only inky blackness. The air in the place felt heavy and oppressive, with an attending chill that fought to take his breath away. He looked down and was relieved to see a faint reflection off a surface—not the dirt and rock of the tunnel, but a floor, smooth and dark like polished mica. Bravely taking a step forward, he noticed that the light-circle moved with him, illuminating a little more of the area ahead.

Feeling more confident, he began to slowly and deliberately walk in the direction he had been facing, focusing on the floor for fear it might at any moment drop away beneath him. He was so intent on watching his feet that Mack blundered into an object in front of him and almost fell. It was a chair, a comfortable-looking wooden chair in the middle of... nothing. Mack quickly decided to sit and wait. As he did, the light that had assisted him continued to move forward as if he had kept walking.

Directly in front of him, he now could make out an ebony desk of considerable size, completely bare. And then he jumped when the light coalesced on one spot, and he finally saw her. Behind the desk sat a tall, beautiful, olive-skinned woman with chiseled Hispanic features, clothed in a dark-colored flowing robe. She sat as straight and regal as a high court judge. She was stunning. She is beauty, he thought. Everything that sensuality strives to be, but falls painfully short.

In the dim light it was difficult to see where her face began, as her hair and robe framed and merged into her visage. Her eyes glinted and glistened as if they were portals into the vastness of the starry night sky, reflecting some unknown light source within her. He dared not speak, afraid that his voice would simply be swallowed up in the intensity of the room's focus on her. He thought, I'm Mickey Mouse about to speak to Pavarotti. The thought made him smile.

As if somehow sharing a simple delight in the grotesqueness of that image, she smiled back, and the place noticeably brightened. That was all it took for Mack to understand that he was expected and welcomed here. She looked strangely familiar, as if he might have known or glimpsed her somewhere in the past, only he knew that he had never truly seen or met her before.

"May I ask... If I may... I mean, who are you?" Mack fumbled, his voice sounding every bit to him like Mickey's, barely leaving an impression on the stillness of the room but then lingering like the shadow of an echo. She ignored his query.

"Do you understand why you are here?" Like a breeze sweeping away the dust, her voice gently ushered his question out of the room. Mack could almost feel her words rain down on his head and melt into his spine, sending delicious tingles everywhere. He shivered and

decided that he never wanted to speak again. He only wanted her to talk, to speak to him or to anyone, just as long as he could be present. But she waited.

“You know,” he said quietly, his own voice suddenly so rich and resonant that Mack was tempted to look behind him to see who had spoken. Somehow he knew that what he had said was the truth... it simply sounded like it. “I have no idea,” he added, fumbling again and turning his gaze toward the floor. “No one told me.”

“Well, Mackenzie Allen Phillips,” she said with a laugh, causing him to look up quickly, “I am here to help you.” If a rainbow makes a sound, or a flower as it grows, that was the sound of her laughter. It was a shower of light, an invitation to talk, and Mack chuckled along with her, not even knowing or caring why.

Soon again there was silence and her face, though remaining soft, took on a fiery intensity, as if she was able to peer deep inside of him, past the pretenses and facades, down to the places that are rarely, if ever, spoken of. “Today is a very serious day with very serious consequences.” She paused, as if to add weight to her already tangibly heavy words.

“Mackenzie, you are here, in part, because of your children, but you are also here for—”

“My children?” Mack interrupted. “What do you mean, I’m here because of my children?”

“Mackenzie, you love your children in a way that your own father was never able to love you and your sisters.”

“Of course I love my children. Every parent loves their children,” Mack asserted. “But why does that have anything to do with why I’m here?”

“In some sense every parent does love their children,” she responded, ignoring his second question. “But some parents are too broken to love them well and others are barely able to love them at all; you should understand that. But you, you do love your children well—very well.”

“I learned much of that from Nan.”

“We know. But you did learn, didn’t you?”

“I suppose I did.”

“Among the mysteries of a broken humanity, that too is rather remarkable: remarkable: to learn, to allow change.” She was as calm as a windless sea. “So then, Mackenzie, may I ask which of your children you love the most?”

Mack smiled inside. As the kids had come along, he had wrestled to answer this very question. “I don’t love any one of them more than any of the others. I love each of them differently,” he said, choosing his words carefully.

“Explain that to me, Mackenzie,” she said with interest.

“Well, each one of my children is unique. And that uniqueness and special personhood calls out a unique response from me.” Mack settled back into his chair. “I remember after Jon, my first, was born. I was so captivated by the wonder of who this little life was that I actually worried about whether I would have anything left to love a second child with. But when Tyler came along, it was as if he brought with him a special gift for me, a whole new capacity to love him specially. Come to think of it, it’s like when Papa says she is especially fond of someone. When I think of each of my children individually, I find that I am especially fond of each one.”

“Well said, Mackenzie!” Her appreciation was tangible, but then she leaned forward slightly, her tone still soft but serious. “But what about when they do not behave, or they make choices other than those you would want them to make, or they are just belligerent and

rude? What about when they embarrass you in front of others? How does that affect your love for them?”

Mack responded slowly and deliberately, “It doesn’t, really.” He knew that what he was saying was true, even if Katie didn’t believe it sometimes. “I admit that it does affect me and sometimes I get embarrassed or angry, but even when they act badly, they are still my sons and my daughter, they are still Josh and Kate, and they will be forever. What they do might affect my pride, but not my love for them.” She sat back, beaming.

“You are wise in the ways of real love, Mackenzie. So many believe that it is love that grows, but it is the knowing that grows and love simply expands to contain it. Love is just the skin of knowing. Mackenzie, you love your children, whom you know so well, with a wonderful and real love.”

A little embarrassed at her praise, Mack looked down. “Well, thanks, but I’m not that way with very many other people. My love tends to be pretty conditional most of the time.”

“But it’s a start, isn’t it, Mackenzie? And you didn’t move beyond your father’s inability on your own—it was God and you together who changed you to love this way. And now you love your children much the way Father loves his.”

Mack could feel his jaw involuntarily clench as he listened, and he felt the anger once more begin to rise. What should have been a reassuring commendation seemed more like a bitter pill that he now refused to swallow. He tried to relax to cover his emotions, but by the look in her eyes, he knew it was too late.

“Hmmm,” she mused. “Something I said bother you, Mackenzie?” Her gaze now made him uncomfortable. He felt exposed. “Mackenzie,” she encouraged, “is there something you would like to say?”

The silence left by her question now hung in the air. Mack struggled to retain his composure. He could hear his mother’s advice ringing in his ears: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, better to not speak at all.” “Uh... well, no! Not really.”

“Mackenzie,” she prompted, “this is not a time for your mother’s common sense. This is a time for honesty, for truth. You don’t believe that Father loves his children very well, do you? You don’t truly believe that God is good, do you?”

“Is Missy his child?” Mack snapped.

“Of course!” she answered.

“Then no!” he blurted, rising to his feet. “I don’t believe that God loves all of his children very well!” He had said it, and now his accusation echoed off whatever walls surrounded the chamber.

While Mack stood there, angry and ready to explode, the woman remained calm and unchanging in her demeanor. Slowly she rose from her high-backed chair, moving silently behind it and motioning him toward it.

“Why don’t you sit here?”

“Is that what honesty gets you, the hot seat?” he muttered, but he didn’t move, he simply stared back at her.

“Mackenzie.” She remained standing behind her chair. “Earlier I began to tell you why you are here today. Not only are you here because of your children, but you are here for judgment.”

As the word echoed in the chamber, panic rose inside Mack like a swelling tide and slowly he sank into his chair. Instantly he felt guilty as memories spilled through his mind like rats fleeing the rising flood. He gripped the arms of his chair, trying to find some balance in

the onslaught of images and emotions. His failures as a human being suddenly loomed large, and in the back of his mind he could almost hear a voice intoning his catalog of sins, his dread deepening as the list grew longer and longer. He had no defense. He was lost and he knew it.

“Mackenzie—” she began, only to be interrupted.

“Now I understand. I’m dead, aren’t I? That’s why I can see Jesus and Papa, ’cause I’m dead.” He sat back and looked up into the darkness, feeling sick to his stomach. “I can’t believe it! I didn’t even feel anything.” He looked at the woman who patiently watched him. “How long have I been dead?” he asked.

“Mackenzie,” she began, “I am sorry to disappoint you, but you have not yet fallen asleep in your world, and I believe that you have mis—” Again, Mack cut her off.

“I’m not dead?” Now he was incredulous and rose again to his feet. “You mean all this is real and I’m still alive? But I thought you said I came here for judgment.”

“I did,” she stated matter-of-factly, a look of amusement on her face. “But Macken—”

“Judgment? And I’m not even dead?” A third time he stopped her, processing what he’d heard, anger replacing his panic. “This hardly seems fair!” He knew his emotions were not helping. “Does this happen to other people—getting judged, I mean, before they’re even dead? What if I change? What if I do better the rest of my life? What if I repent? What then?”

“Is there something you wish to repent of, Mackenzie?” she asked, unfazed by his outburst. Mack slowly sat back down. He looked at the smooth surface of the floor and then shook his head before answering.

“I wouldn’t know where to begin,” he mumbled. “I’m quite a mess, aren’t I?”

“Yes, you are.” Mack looked up and she smiled back. “You are a glorious, destructive mess, Mackenzie, but you are not here to repent, at least not in the way you understand. Mackenzie, you are not here to be judged.”

“But,” he said, “I thought you said that I was...”

“Here for judgment?” She remained cool and placid as a summer breeze as she finished his question. “I did. But you are not on trial here.” Mack took a deep breath, relieved at her words. “You will be the judge!” The knot in his stomach returned as he realized what she had said. Finally, he dropped his eyes to the chair that stood waiting for him.

“What? Me? I’d rather not.” He paused. “I don’t have any ability to judge.”

“Oh, that is not true,” returned the quick reply, tinged now with a hint of sarcasm. “You have already proven yourself very capable, even in our short time together. And besides, you have judged many throughout your life. You have judged the actions and even the motivations of others, as if you somehow knew what those were in truth. You have judged the color of skin and body language and body odor. You have judged history and relationships. relationships. You have even judged the value of a person’s life by the quality of your concept of beauty. By all accounts, you are quite well practiced in the activity.”

Mack felt shame reddening his face. He had to admit he had done an awful lot of judging in his time. But he was no different from anyone else, was he? Who doesn’t jump to conclusions about others from the way they impact us? There it was again—his self-centered view of the world around him. He looked up and saw her peering intently at him and quickly looked down again.

“Tell me,” she inquired, “if I may ask, on what criteria do you base your judgments?” Mack looked up and tried to meet her gaze but found that when he looked directly at her, his thinking wavered. To peer into her eyes and keep a train of coherent and logical thought

seemed impossible. He had to look away and into the darkness of the corner of the room, hoping to collect himself.

“Nothing that seems to make much sense at the moment,” he finally admitted, his voice faltering. “I confess that when I made those judgments I felt quite justified, but now...”

“Of course you did.” She said it like a statement of fact, like something routine, not playing for even a moment upon his evident shame and distress.

“Judging requires that you think yourself superior over the one you judge. Well, today you will be given the opportunity to put all your ability to use. Come on,” she said, patting the back of the chair. “I want you to sit here. Now.”

Hesitantly but obediently he walked toward her and the waiting chair. With each step he seemed to grow smaller or they both grew larger, he couldn't tell which. He crawled up on the chair and felt childish with the massive desktop in front of him and his feet barely touching the floor.

“And... just what will I be judging?” he asked, turning to look up at her.

“Not what.” She paused and moved to the side of the desk. “Whom.”

His discomfort was growing in leaps and bounds, and sitting in an oversized, regal chair didn't help. What right did he have to judge anyone? Sure, in some measure he probably was guilty of judging almost everyone he had met and many he had not.

Mack knew he was thoroughly guilty of being self-centered. How dare he judge anyone else? All his judgments had been superficial, based on appearance and actions, things easily interpreted by whatever state of mind or prejudice supported the need to exalt himself, to feel safe, or to belong. He also knew that he was starting to panic.

“Your imagination,” she said, interrupting his train of thought, “is not serving you well at this moment.”

No kidding, Sherlock, is what he thought, but all that came out of his mouth was a weak “I really can't do this.”

“Whether you can or cannot is yet to be determined,” she said with a smile. “And my name is not Sherlock.” Mack was grateful for the darkened room that hid his embarrassment.

The silence that followed seemed to hold him captive for much longer than the few seconds it actually took to find his voice and finally ask the question: “So, who is it that I am supposed to judge?”

“God”—she paused—“and the human race.” She said it as if it was of no particular consequence. The words simply rolled off her tongue, as if this were a daily occurrence.

Mack was dumbfounded. “You have got to be kidding!” he exclaimed.

“Why not? Surely there are many people in your world you think deserve judgment. There must be at least a few who are to blame for so much of the pain and suffering. What about the greedy who feed off the poor of the world? What about the ones who sacrifice their young children to war? What about the men who beat their wives, Mackenzie? What about the fathers who beat their sons for no reason but to assuage their own suffering? Don't they deserve judgment, Mackenzie?”

Mack could sense the depths of his unresolved anger rising like a flood of fury. He sank back into the chair, trying to maintain his balance against an onslaught of images, but he could feel his control ebbing away. His stomach knotted as he clenched his fists, his breathing coming short and quick.

“And what about the man who preys on innocent little girls? What about him, Mackenzie? Is that man guilty? Should he be judged?”

“Yes!” screamed Mack. “Damn him to hell!”

“Is he to blame for your loss?”

“Yes!”

“What about his father, the man who twisted his son into a terror, what about him?”

“Yes, him too!”

“How far do we go back, Mackenzie? This legacy of brokenness goes all the way back to Adam—what about him? But why stop there? What about God? God started this whole thing. Is God to blame?”

Mack was reeling. He didn’t feel like a judge at all, but rather the one on trial. The woman was unrelenting.

“Isn’t this where you are stuck, Mackenzie? Mackenzie? Isn’t this what fuels The Great Sadness? That God cannot be trusted? Surely, a father like you can judge the Father!”

Again his anger rose like a towering flame. He wanted to lash out, but she was right and there was no point in denying it.

She continued, “Isn’t that your just complaint, Mackenzie? That God has failed you, that he failed Missy? That before the creation, God knew that one day your Missy would be brutalized, and still he created? And then he allowed that twisted soul to snatch her from your loving arms when he had the power to stop him. Isn’t God to blame, Mackenzie?”

Mack was looking at the floor, a flurry of images pulling his emotions in every direction. Finally he said it, louder than he intended, and pointed his finger right at her: “Yes! God is to blame!” The accusation hung in the room as the gavel fell in his heart.

“Then,” she said with finality, “if you are able to judge God so easily, you certainly can judge the world.” Again she spoke without emotion. “You must choose two of your children to spend eternity in God’s new heavens and new earth, but only two.”

“What?” he erupted, turning to her in disbelief. “And you must choose three of your children to spend eternity in hell.” Mack couldn’t believe what he was hearing and started to panic.

“Mackenzie.” Her voice now came as calm and wonderful as he had first heard it. “I am only asking you to do something that you believe God does. He knows every person ever conceived, and he knows them so much more deeply and clearly than you will ever know your own children. 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?”

“I suppose I do. I’ve just never thought about it like this.” He was stumbling over his words in his shock. “I just assumed that somehow God could do that. Talking about hell was always sort of an abstract conversation, not about anyone that I truly...” Mack hesitated, realizing that what he was about to say would sound ugly. “Not about anyone that I truly cared about.”

“So you suppose, then, that God does this easily, but you cannot? Come now, Mackenzie. Which three of your five children will you sentence to hell? Katie is struggling with you the most right now. She treats you badly and has said hurtful things to you. Perhaps she is the first and most logical choice. What about her? You are the judge, Mackenzie, and you must choose.”

“I don’t want to be the judge,” he said, standing up. Mack’s mind was racing. This couldn’t be real. How could God ask him to choose among his own children? There was no way he could sentence Katie, or any of his other children, to an eternity in hell just because she had sinned against him. Even if Katie or Josh or Jon or Tyler committed some heinous crime, he still wouldn’t do it. He couldn’t! For him, it wasn’t about their performance; it was about his love for them.

“I can’t do this,” he said softly.

“You must,” she replied.

“I can’t do this,” he said louder and more vehemently.

“You must,” she said again, her voice softer.

“I... will... not... do... this!” Mack yelled, his blood boiling hot inside him.

“You must,” she whispered.

“I can’t. I can’t. I won’t!” he screamed, and now the words and emotions came tumbling out. The woman just stood watching and waiting. Finally he looked at her, pleading with his eyes.

“Could I go instead? If you need someone to torture for eternity, I’ll go in their place. Would that work? Could I do that?” He fell at her feet, crying and begging now. “Please let me go for my children. Please, I would be happy to... Please, I am begging you. Please... Please...”

“Mackenzie, Mackenzie,” she whispered, and her words came like a splash of cool water on a brutally hot day. Her hands gently touched his cheeks as she lifted him to his feet. Looking at her through blurring tears, he could see that her smile was radiant. “Now you sound like Jesus. You have judged well, Mackenzie. I am so proud of you!”

“But I haven’t judged anything,” Mack offered in confusion.

“Oh, but you have. You have judged them worthy of love, even if it costs you everything. That is how Jesus loves.” When he heard the words he thought of his new friend waiting by the lake. “And now you know Papa’s heart,” she added, “who loves all her children perfectly.”

Immediately Missy’s image flashed in his mind and he found himself bristling. Without thinking he lifted himself back onto the chair.

“What just happened, Mackenzie?” she asked.

He saw no use in trying to hide it. “I understand Jesus’ love, but God is another story. I don’t find them to be alike at all.”

“You haven’t enjoyed your time with Papa?” she asked, surprised.

“No, I love Papa, whoever she is. She’s amazing, but she’s not anything like the God I’ve known.”

“Maybe your understanding of God is wrong.”

“Maybe. I just don’t see how God loved Missy perfectly.”

“So the judgment continues?” she said with a sadness in her voice. That made Mack pause, but only for a moment.

“What am I supposed to think? I just don’t understand how God could love Missy and let her go through that horror. She was innocent. She didn’t do anything to deserve that.”

“I know.”

Mack continued, “Did God use her to punish me for what I did to my father? That isn’t fair. She didn’t deserve this. Nan didn’t deserve this.” Tears streamed down his face. “I might have, but they didn’t.”

“Is that who your God is, Mackenzie? It is no wonder you are drowning in your sorrow. Papa isn’t like that, Mackenzie. She’s not punishing you, or Missy, or Nan. This was not her doing.”

“But she didn’t stop it.”

“No, she didn’t. She doesn’t stop a lot of things that cause her pain. Your world is severely broken. You demanded your independence, and now you are angry with the One who loved you enough to give it to you. Nothing is as it should be, as Papa desires it to be, and as it will be one day. Right now your world is lost in darkness and chaos, and horrible things happen to those she is especially fond of.”

“Then why doesn’t she do something about it?” “She already has...”

“You mean what Jesus did?”

“Haven’t you seen the wounds on Papa too?”

“I didn’t understand them. How could she...”

“For love. She chose the way of the cross, where mercy triumphs over justice because of love. Would you instead prefer she’d chosen justice for everyone? Do you want justice, ‘Dear Judge?’” And she smiled as she said it.

“No, I don’t,” he said as he lowered his head. “Not for me, and not for my children.” She waited. “But I still don’t understand why Missy had to die.”

“She didn’t have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa’s. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish her good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil, and Papa has responded with goodness. What happened to Missy was the work of evil, and no one in your world is immune from it.”

“But it hurts so much. There must be a better way.”

“There is. You just can’t see it now. Return from your independence, Mackenzie. Give up being her judge and know Papa for who she is. Then you will be able to embrace her love in the midst of your pain, instead of pushing her away with your self-centered perception of how you think the universe should be. Papa has crawled inside of your world to be with you, to be with Missy.”

Mack stood up from the chair. “I don’t want to be a judge anymore. I really do want to trust Papa.” Unnoticed by Mack, the room lightened yet again as he moved around the table toward the simple chair where it all began. “But I’ll need help.”

She reached out and hugged Mack. “Now that sounds like the start of the trip home, Mackenzie. It certainly does.”

