

The Shack



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM P. YOUNG

William Paul Young had what he calls an “unusual” upbringing—although he also likes to point out that each person’s life story is unusual in its own way. In his case, Young spent the first ten years of his life in the highlands of New Guinea, where his parents were missionaries. There, he became close with the Dani people, an ethnic group from the region. The Dani became a second family to Young, teaching him their language and welcoming him into their homes. Though Young was sent to boarding school at the age of six and moved around schools in Western Canada for the rest of his education, his early days in New Guinea were formative. From there, Young attended Bible College and received an undergraduate degree in religion. Though Young held down a number of jobs—working in churches, construction companies, insurance, food processing, and more—he never imagined himself as a professional author. One year, he wrote *The Shack* as a Christmas gift for his six children. Friends saw potential in the book and encouraged him to self-publish it. Just a few years later, the book had rocketed to the top of *The New York Times'* bestseller list, catching on largely thanks to word-of-mouth and church groups who shared the book. Young has gone on to write other Christian-themed novels.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though initially intended only to help his family understand faith, *The Shack*, as well as Young’s later books, also attempt to combat a perceived decline in faith and growing disillusionment with religion. Indeed, some Pew Research Center polls have shown that the number of Americans who do not practice religion or who have left the religion they were raised in are on the rise. Young’s book attempts to make it easier for readers to maintain their faith even in the face of growing disillusionment with the church. Young has also said that he hopes his unconventional portrayal of God as a black woman in *The Shack*, as well as characters in his other novels who are people of color, can help to dispel racism. *The Shack*’s success also reflects a unique moment in publishing, when technology has made it possible for amateur writers like Young to reach wide audiences. After the manuscript was widely rejected by a swathe of both religious and secular publishers, Young self-published the book with a few friends and spent around \$300 to create a website for it. From there, word of the book spread on the internet, which also facilitated bulk orders of the book by churches and religious groups who then resold the book at a profit. In 2008 *The New York Times* wrote that sales from the

book’s website likely accounted for a greater-than-average portion of the book’s sales, demonstrating that access to online publishing and distribution methods were important to the book’s success.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Following the success of *The Shack*, Young has gone on to pen other Christian-themed novels. In *Cross Roads*, a 2012 novel about a ruthless businessman who rethinks his ways after a cerebral hemorrhage brings him in contact with God, Young returns to many of the themes present in *The Shack*. Like *The Shack*, *Cross Roads* features an encounter with a three-part divinity, comprised of God in the form of a young girl, Jesus, and a holy spirit embodied by a Lakota Native man. Young hoped to use the book to “dive deeper into the human soul.” He also hoped the book would represent community more than *The Shack*, which he saw as being focused on an individual journey. In 2015, Young published *Eve*, a retelling of the story of the Garden of Eden from Eve’s perspective. Like *The Shack*, *Eve* focuses on relationships and especially gender equality, a theme briefly touched on in Young’s first book. Though *The Shack* achieved significant popular success, it also inspired a number of critiques from religious leaders who saw the book’s unconventional take on the identity of God and the nature of faith as heretical. One such critique, the book *Burning Down The Shack*, points out perceived discrepancies between *The Shack* and the Bible, and argues that the doctrine presented in the novel is dangerous. Those critiques in turn inspired theologian Randal Rouser’s *Finding God in The Shack*, a more sympathetic guide to the book offering deeper exploration of ideas in the novel as well as responses to some of the most common criticisms against it.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Shack*
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **Where Written:** Oregon
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Christian Fiction
- **Setting:** Pacific Northwest, United States
- **Climax:** Law enforcement, led by Mack, recover Missy’s body from the cave
- **Antagonist:** Missy’s killer; grief and doubt
- **Point of View:** Second person

EXTRA CREDIT

Off the Charts. Although millions of copies of the book have since been sold, Young initially printed only fifteen copies of *The Shack*, thinking it would only be read by friends and family.

The House. Young has said that the shack in the book is a metaphor for “the house you build from your own pain.” He cites sexual abuse he suffered as a child and the ongoing impact of his own extramarital affair as inspiration.



PLOT SUMMARY

Willie, the story’s narrator, introduces his friend Mackenzie Allen Phillips. Mack had a difficult childhood; his father, a violent alcoholic, terrorized Mack and his family. As an adult, Mack is still haunted by those memories, but he has found happiness with his wife Nan and their five children.

The main story opens on a snowy day. Mack watches the snow from his home office, though the beauty of nature can’t lift his depression, which he thinks of as *The Great Sadness*. Mack goes to the mailbox to find a note inviting him up to the shack next weekend, signed “Papa.” It sends Mack a chill of anger and fear. Nan calls to say that she’s worried about Kate, the couple’s oldest daughter, who has been distant. Nan says she is praying to Papa—her nickname for God—for answers.

Three years earlier, Mack took his children Kate, Josh, and Missy—then six—on a camping trip. On the way, the family stopped at Multnomah **waterfall**, where Mack related a favorite story of Missy’s. In the story, a Native American princess sacrifices herself by jumping off of the waterfall in order to save her tribe. Later that night, Missy tells Mack that the story reminds her of Jesus, and asks if God will ever ask her to jump off a waterfall to save her family. Touched, Mack reassures her that she will never have to do anything like that.

All goes well until the last morning of the trip, when Kate and Josh go to play in a canoe. Missy colors at a picnic table while Mack watches. Kate tries to wave at Mack from the canoe, but it capsizes, trapping Josh below. Mack runs to help his son, but his relief upon saving Josh is quickly overshadowed when he sees that Missy is gone.

A camper tells Mack that he saw a little girl in the back of a truck crying as the truck left the campsite. Police officers arrive on the scene, and one, Tommy Dalton, goes with Mack to look over the campsite. There they find a ladybug pin that matches a signature left by a serial killer known as “Little Ladykiller.” The next day, the truck is spotted near a national forest and Mack joins officers in canvassing the area. Sam asks Mack to identify something in a dilapidated shack. When Mack sees the object, he breaks down: it is Missy’s dress, torn and bloodstained.

In the present, the family has struggled to recover from Missy’s

death. Kate has become withdrawn, and Mack feels himself drifting from God. He can’t stop thinking about the note in the mailbox, so when Nan says that she is thinking of taking the kids to see her family, Mack jumps at the chance to go to the shack alone.

Mack borrows Willie’s truck and drives to the forest. Feeling sick and overwhelmed, he enters the dismal shack and breaks down at the sight of the bloodstain on the floor. He leaves the cabin, but the forest starts to transform around him, blooming with the new life of spring. He turns to see the shack transformed into a beautiful cabin beside a lake. As he approaches, the door is swept open by an African American woman who introduces herself as Papa. Behind her is a small Asian woman named Sarayu and a middle Eastern man who introduces himself as Jesus. They explain that, together, they are God, which makes a strange kind of sense to Mack.

Inside, Mack talks with Papa as she prepares dinner. She says she will try to help him understand that he is loved, and that God is always with him. Mack and the three parts of God enjoy dinner together, talking about Mack’s family and the importance of relationships based on respect and love rather than hierarchy and power. After the meal, Papa leads a devotion. Mack is surprised that it does not involve scripture or any formal ritual, but instead is a moment for Jesus to express his sincere love for Papa. After the meal, Jesus explains that Papa is the creator God, Jesus is her son and human incarnate form, and Sarayu is the Holy Spirit.

That night, Mack has a nightmare about Missy. Upon waking he asks Papa if she ever punishes her children, but she says that is not her nature. After breakfast, Sarayu invites Mack out into a beautiful **garden**, and together they clear a patch of flowers. As they work, Sarayu talks to Mack about good and evil, warning that using subjective measures of right and wrong can lead to unfair judgement of others. It is important to leave judgement to God instead. Mack then goes to join Jesus for a picnic lunch. Jesus invites Mack to walk across the surface of the lake, which startles Mack. But with a little encouragement, he finds that he can easily walk across with Jesus by his side. As they eat, Jesus again emphasizes the danger of hierarchies in relationships. He sends Mack down a path beside a **waterfall**, saying someone is waiting for him.

Mack follows the path into a large cavern. Inside is a tall, serious woman standing behind a desk. She tells Mack that he is there for judgement—not his own, but to judge God and all humanity. Provoking Mack’s anger by reminding him of his daughter’s killer, the woman asks if God is to blame for what happened. Full of grief and pain, Mack says that God is responsible. The woman tells Mack that if he judges God, he judges all of humanity by extension. She then tries to force Mack to choose only two of his five children to join God in heaven, but he refuses. The woman says that being faced with this choice helps Mack understand Papa. She also explains that

horrible things like Missy's death are not part of God's plan, but a result of humans choosing to be independent rather than loving and trusting God. The world is broken, and the way to fix it is to give up judgement and independence and trust in God.

Suddenly, Mack hears children's laughter. One wall of the cavern becomes transparent and he is able to see all of his children, including Missy, playing by the lake with Jesus. Although they cannot see or hear him, Missy seems to know that he is there, and runs over to sign "I love you" and blow him a kiss. As Missy returns to the other children, a waterfall crashes down in front of Mack, obscuring his view.

Walking back to the lake afterwards, Mack realizes that *The Great Sadness* has lifted. He meets up with Jesus, who explains that the woman in the cave was Sophia, a personification of Papa's wisdom. Jesus says that he, Papa, and Sarayu were with Missy throughout her ordeal, because God never truly leaves anyone. He also explains that the church as Mack knows it is just a human institution or bureaucracy that gets between Jesus and his believers.

Mack joins Papa on the porch for conversation and some fresh scones. Thinking of the waterfall and the legend of the Multnomah princess, Mack asks if Missy had to die so that Papa could teach him. Papa is disappointed, saying that just because she can create purpose and positivity out of tragedies does not mean that she causes those tragedies. She also says that Mack is afraid of facing his own emotions, which is why he lied to Nan about coming to the shack.

Mulling this over, Mack takes a canoe out on the lake. Sarayu appears in the canoe and invites Mack to return to the cabin for dinner. She tells him that emotions, whether positive or negative, are necessary to experience the full range of what life has to offer. She encourages Mack not to suppress his emotions but to think about their origins. At dinner, Sarayu explains that humans follow rules, laws, and commandments in order to make themselves feel independent and in control, and to judge one another.

After the meal, Sarayu touches Mack's eyes so that he can see as the three of them see. When he opens his eyes, Mack finds himself on a small hill overlooking a clearing. The world glimmers with light emanating from every living creature. The clearing fills with a group of children glowing with inner white light, and then a circle of adults shining with more complicated colors, and finally a circle of angels glowing blue. One man's light is volatile. Sarayu explains that the colorful lights are a representation of emotions, and that the man is Mack's father. Overcome, Mack runs towards him and they embrace and forgive one another. Jesus emerges and individually greets each assembled person.

The next morning, Papa, now appearing as a man with a silver ponytail, shakes Mack awake and makes him breakfast. Sarayu gives Mack a tightly rolled mat full of flowers and herbs from

the garden. Mack and Papa begin walking through a path in the woods marked by the sign of a red arc drawn on certain trees and rocks. When they arrive at a clearing, Papa says that Mack must forgive Missy's killer so that he can let go of his pain. Tearfully, Mack says out loud that he forgives the killer.

Papa then leads Mack into a cave marked by the red arc, where they find Missy's body under a sheet. Mack wraps her in the scented mat from Sarayu and they head back to the cabin. There, Jesus shows Mack a beautifully carved coffin he has prepared for Missy, decorated with scenes of her with her family. They carefully place Missy inside and take the coffin to the space in the garden that Mack and Sarayu cleared the day before.

Back inside, Papa tells Mack that he has the choice of staying in the cabin, where he will continue learning from God, or returning to his life. Sarayu says that if he returns home, he can choose to keep making the world better by being kind. Mack decides to go back. Sarayu also says that Kate believes she is to blame for Missy's death, a revelation that Mack hopes will allow him to reconnect with Kate and begin the healing process.

After changing into his old clothes, Mack falls asleep on the floor of the cabin. When he wakes up, he is back in the dilapidated shack, and God is gone. He feels excited to apply the lessons he learned over the weekend. On the drive home, however, another driver slams into Mack's car. He is airlifted to a nearby hospital and drifts in and out of consciousness over the next several days. Willie visits as Mack is becoming more lucid and asks about the shack. Mack is reminded of all that has happened, and soon tells Nan everything. He calls Kate to his bedside to tell her that Missy's death is not her fault. Kate is overcome with emotion but also clearly relieved.

After about a month, Mack and Nan go with Tommy Dalton to the area near the shack. Tommy doesn't believe Mack's fantastical story until he leads them to the cave where Missy's body is. Experts descend on the scene, and soon they have enough evidence to find and convict the serial killer who killed Missy. In an afterword, Willie says that Mack has changed dramatically since his weekend at the shack. *The Great Sadness* has lifted, and Mack is quick to love and forgive. He hopes that everyone can connect with Jesus, Sarayu, and Papa.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Mackenzie Allen Phillips – The protagonist of the novel, Mack is a nondescript everyman who has long struggled to reconcile his faith in God with the daily reality before him. As a child, Mack's father, a violent alcoholic, terrorized the family. When Mack turned thirteen, he ran away from home after poisoning every bottle of alcohol in the house. Now living in the Pacific Northwest, Mack still grapples with those memories but has

found great happiness with his wife Nan and his five children. Like Nan, Mack believes in God and thinks of religion as a major force in his life. Nevertheless, he can't shake a sense of uneasiness towards God, and has never been able to call him by the familiar name "Papa" as Nan does. That mistrust is deepened when Mack's youngest child, Missy, is kidnapped and murdered during a family camping trip. After Missy's death, Mack feels disconnected from faith, confused about how God could allow such a terrible thing to happen, and wracked by guilt and grief. These feelings take the form of *The Great Sadness*, an overwhelming depression that keeps Mack from feeling or enjoying anything. Over the course of the book, he is pushed to confront his feelings about Missy's death, and to challenge his preconceived notions about the nature of God. After meeting Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu in the shack, Mack is able to overcome his trauma and rebuild a loving relationship with God.

Papa/Elousia – Papa is one facet of the three-part God depicted in the novel (the others being Jesus and Sarayu). Papa also calls herself "Elousia," which Jesus explains means "the Creator God. She fills the role of "the father" in the trinity, but challenges many of the conventions of that role. Initially, Papa appears as a middle-aged black woman, quick to make jokes and jabs—much to the surprise of Mack, who has always pictured God as an aloof, Gandalf-esque old white man. Papa says she has assumed the familiar name used by Mack's wife Nan to help Mack identify her with God, but has taken on an unexpected appearance to help Mack get around some of his assumptions about religion. Further challenging Mack's assumptions, Papa does not use shame, guilt, or violent punishment. Instead, she encourages Mack and all human beings to recognize her love and to trust that, though she can create positive outcomes from tragedies, she does not cause tragedies to happen. Papa has scars on her wrists from Jesus's crucifixion, which she explains are due to the fact that all three personas of God are always together and always with humans.

Sarayu – Sarayu fulfills the role of the "Holy Spirit" in the three-part version of God seen in the novel (the other parts being Jesus and Papa). Jesus explains to Mack that her name means "a common wind" in one human language. The exact nature of that role and even her specific characteristics are intentionally mysterious, and she seems to be the embodiment of some of the seemingly supernatural elements of God, such as his ability to be all-knowing and ever-present. She appears as an Asian woman with a shimmering, almost transparent cast to her body that makes her slightly difficult to look at. In part by taking him to a **garden** representing his wild yet ordered soul, Sarayu attempts to help Mack to understand the nature of his innermost spiritual self as well as how to comprehend and manage his feelings.

Jesus – Jesus is "the son" in the tri-part God depicted in the novel (the other parts being Papa and Sarayu). In some ways, he

most closely aligns with Mack's preconceived image: he is a kind Middle Eastern man who enjoys woodworking and helps Mack to literally walk on water. With kindness and humor, he helps Mack to understand new ideas about faith over the course of the weekend, including talking through Mack's ideas about what he expects God to look and act like. He also tells Mack that the church is simply a bureaucratic institution created by humans, and he prefers for those who follow him to try to form more personal, direct connections rather than being distracted by the trappings of religion.

Missy – Missy, Nan and Mack's youngest child, is a lively six-year-old girl who enjoys asking questions and spending time with her family. She is fascinated by stories of sacrifice like those of Jesus and that of the Multnomah princess, a Native American who sacrificed herself by jumping off of a **waterfall** in order to save her tribe. When Missy is kidnapped and murdered during a camping trip, it sends Mack into depression and a crisis of faith.

Nan Phillips – Nan, Mack's wife, is an oncology nurse who uses her strong sense of faith to help patients facing terminal illness. She has a uniquely personal relationship with God, calling him by the familiar name "Papa." Like Mack, Nan was devastated by Missy's death, and is concerned by how her daughter Kate has retreated in the wake of the tragedy.

Sophia – Sophia, the personification of God's wisdom, is a beautiful, commanding woman who forces Mack to realize that in judging other people, his is actually, by extension, judging God for allowing evil to exist in the world. Jesus later explains that Sophia is not a distinct part of the trinity, but instead "part of the mystery surrounding Sarayu."

Willie – Willie is an old friend of Mack's. He serves as a narrator for the prologue and epilogue of the book, and is possibly a stand in for the novel's real author, William Paul Young. He frames *The Shack* by writing that he is relating the story of the weekend as told to him by Mack. Willie also enables the events in the story by lending Mack his truck so that Mack can go to the shack for the weekend.

Mack's Father – A violent alcoholic who abused Mack and other members of his family. Before running away from the family farm, Mack fills all the alcohol bottles he can find with poison. When Sarayu gives Mack the ability to see as God does, Mack sees his father; the man has forgiven him for poisoning him and seeks forgiveness for his behavior as a father.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kate – Kate is Mack and Nan's older daughter. At the opening of the novel, Kate is struggling and withdrawn. Because she took her sister's death especially hard, she has been lashing out and retreating from her parents.

Josh – Josh is Nan and Mack's youngest son. Along with Kate, he was on the camping trip when Missy was kidnapped. He has

weathered her death more successfully because of the relationships he has formed in the wake of her death.

The Ducettes – A family with two young daughters about Josh and Kate's ages. They befriend Mack and his family during the camping trip and help in the search for Missy.

The Madisons – A Canadian couple who befriend Mack and his family during the camping trip.

Tommy Dalton – A police officer who leads the search for Missy after she is kidnapped.

Sam – An FBI officer who connects the evidence surrounding Missy's death to a serial killer known as "The Little Ladykiller."



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



INDEPENDENCE FROM GOD

The Shack tells the story of Mackenzie Allen "Mack" Phillips, who, after his daughter Missy is brutally murdered on a family camping trip, bitterly turns away from God. Everything changes when Mack eventually returns to the shack where his daughter was killed and finds himself face to face with three surprising manifestations of the Christian Trinity: God is a black woman named Papa, the Holy Spirit is an Asian woman named Sarayu, and Jesus is a Middle-Eastern carpenter in keeping with biblical tradition. Together, Sarayu, Papa, and Jesus teach Mack that one of the core reasons he cannot trust God or understand His ways is because all of humanity has chosen independence from God. This choice, the novel argues—to center their own judgments and rules instead of trusting in God's—has come at a great cost to human beings: they can no longer see the purpose behind anything they perceive as bad or evil, and, it follows, can no longer trust that God is able to create purpose from everything.

In the novel, God has given human beings the choice of whether or not to trust his love because love of God is only meaningful if it comes freely. Evil and suffering, Papa tells Mack, exist specifically because of this independence—they arise when humans actively choose to turn away from God's plan. For example, Papa didn't cause Missy to die—that was a choice her killer made. Papa has helped Mack to learn much as a result of Missy's death, but Papa explains that just because she is able to create purpose out of tragedy does not mean that she causes or wants these things to happen.

Sophia, a manifestation of God's wisdom, then challenges

Mack's judgment of evil by asking how far back the punishment of Missy's killer should go: should it extend to the killer's father, and his father before him, all the way back to Adam and even back to God? It follows that judgments of evil are actually judgments of God for creating and not intervening in human life. Furthermore, Sarayu, Papa, and Jesus teach Mack that the judgments he has used to determine good and evil in his own life are predicated on subjective beliefs. Making these judgments is just another way of choosing independence from God, the novel argues, because it puts humans in a position of authority over one another—an authority that should be reserved for God.

The human ideas of rights, laws, and even the rules of the scripture are all human-created and human-enforced laws created in response to evil, which nonetheless divide people and keep them from trusting judgment to God alone.

Judgments make people feel superior and justified in violence towards others. Relying on these rules, then, allows humans to judge and punish one another with impunity. Mack, for example, determines right and wrong based on his own internal value system and how things affect him personally. In this way, humans who try to judge right and wrong for themselves instead of leaving that judgment to God make themselves arbiters of good and evil.

Ultimately *The Shack* argues that because people must be able to freely choose to love God, they also have the option to commit evil acts. It is important to recognize, however, that such acts are not part of God's plan. And although humans may create rules and exact judgment to cope with such evil, these are simply another way of declaring dangerous independence from God. This sense of independence keeps humans from trusting that God is present in dark times and will find a sense of purpose in tragedies, even those he does not cause. God, ironically, has given people the choice for independence so that they may actively choose to put their entire faith in God.



LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Nan, Mack's wife, has always had a close relationship with God, as is exemplified by her affectionate nickname for him: Papa. It takes Mack much longer to realize that he, too, can relate to God on such a deep and intimate level. Over the course of his weekend at the shack, Mack has many conversations and special moments with the three incarnations of God, from **gardening** with Sarayu and cooking with Papa to stargazing with Jesus, that help him start to build a closer relationship with God. As Mack does so, he also learns about the true meaning and importance of relationships. Many human relationships are marred by the presence of power struggles or hierarchies, the novel argues. By embracing open, honest relationships built on love, humans are able to recreate the relationship that God hopes to have with all people.

As the three parts of God tell Mack, power has no place in relationships. Instead, relationships should always center love. Mack is confused by the relationship between the three personas of God at first, and asks them which one is in charge—a question they find baffling. Sarayu explains that authority and hierarchy are simply human inventions that infect relationships with abuse and power dynamics, and, more broadly, lead to hate and war. Misguided power dynamics are further reflected by gender: Jesus tells Mack that God intended for men and women to be equal, but, over the course of human history, men turned to work and women turned to relationships and sought protection from men. This led to men feeling superior to women, which has marred their relationship. Instead, both men and women should prioritize their relationship with God.

Papa further encourages Mack to embrace a love based on genuinely knowing another person. Just as Mack's love expands to encompass each of his children because his relationship with each is unique, God is "especially fond" of each of his children and forgives them when they do wrong. Love is not predicated on expectations of reciprocity, but awareness and openness. It follows that another way to remove power dynamics from relationships is by openly and actively forgiving others. Failing to forgive infects relationships with power imbalances and expectations. Mack observes the love between Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu that is clearly present at all times—even in moments when Mack might turn to tension and fighting in his own relationships. For example, when Jesus drops a heavy bowl in the kitchen, everyone begins to laugh and help one another. Mack wonders if he could bring that same spirit of forgiveness to his own relationships.

More dramatically, forgiving those who have done serious wrongs is a way of removing the pressure of judgment from relationships and restoring a trusting relationship with God. By forgiving Missy's killer, Mack relinquishes his own exhausting feelings of judgment in favor of a sense of peace. By forgiving his father, Mack is able to let go of the lingering pain he felt about his childhood. By judging Missy's killer and his father, Papa argues, Mack had been attempting to take on the role of God, creating an exhausting imbalance of power. Forgiving Missy's killer allows Mack to accept that God will judge the man. In this way, Mack can restore some of his trust in God.

Indeed, over the course of his weekend at the shack, Mack learns from the trinity that his spiritual relationship to God suffers from many of the same imbalances that plague his earthly relationships. As with his relationships to other people, Mack's relationship to God will improve if he frees it of judgments, rules, and expectations. In this way, Mack's encounter with God is surprising in how little it resembles his Christian upbringing. Strict religious doctrine and institutions like the church, Mack learns, are simply other ways of applying rules and value judgments to relationships—in this case, one's

relationship with God.

Likewise, the "devotion" that Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus perform after dinner one night surprises Mack because it bears little resemblance to the recitation of scriptures he remembers from his youth. Papa explains that devotion is about appreciation and honesty, not ritual. Similarly, Jesus explains that the institution of the church as Mack knows it is simply a human invention. All humans can form a direct connection to Jesus without bureaucratic intervention. Instead of religious practice, the actual way to achieve closeness with God is recognition of and trust in God's love.

One reason that Mack has been unable to connect with God, then, is that he doesn't understand what it truly means to be in a relationship with God. *The Shack* illustrates how this relationship, like all healthy relationships, centers love, knowing, and forgiveness over hierarchies, power struggles, and judgment.

GRIEF AND EMOTION



At the beginning of the novel, Mack suffers under the weight of *The Great Sadness*, the depression he feels at the loss of his youngest daughter, Missy,

who was murdered on a family camping trip. Understandably, Mack wants negative emotions about her death to vanish. But when Mack spends a weekend with incarnations of God, the son, and the Holy Spirit in the form of Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu, he learns to face his emotions rather than bury them. God helps Mack see that "bad" emotions, including sadness, are necessary, and that working through emotions is a worthwhile process. It is necessary for Mack to talk about and embrace his pain in order to understand and appreciate his joy.

In the novel, the suppression of emotions is a defense mechanism for dealing with tragedy. However, the only way to begin the process of healing is to address these underlying emotions, even if doing so is painful. Mack experiences the loss of his daughter as an overwhelming force that he calls *The Great Sadness*, which keeps Missy's memory—but also Mack's sense of guilt over her death—alive. The stifling nature of *The Great Sadness* keeps Mack from experiencing a full range of emotions, and, it follows, from enjoying beautiful things like a snowy day or the moon's reflection on a lake. Kate, Mack's oldest daughter, is experiencing a depression of her own, believing she caused Missy's death because she had distracted Mack when Missy was kidnapped. Notably, it is only when Mack confronts Kate and forces her to get those emotions out in the open that she starts to heal. Mack, too, is able to lift *The Great Sadness* only when he addresses and combats the underlying issues that are causing it, including his sense of guilt over Missy's death.

At first, however, as *The Great Sadness* lifts, Mack begins to feel a surge of negative emotions that he wishes he could suppress.

But with Papa's help, Mack begins to see that these emotions can provide useful insights into understanding why he has made certain choices and how he relates to those around him. For example, initially, Mack wishes he could avoid nightmares and even considers suicide as an escape from the sadness he feels. But slowly, when he starts to talk about his feelings with Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus, he starts to see that it is necessary for him to wade into and process these negative emotions in order to begin the process of healing.

Mack also avoids talking about emotions with those he loves, which creates distance between them. Indeed, Mack initially tells himself that he didn't tell Nan that he was returning to the shack, the place Missy was murdered, because he didn't want to worry his wife. But with Papa's help, Mack realizes that he lied to Nan in order to avoid having talk about the sense of doubt and hope that they both would have felt about receiving a message from God inviting them to return to the scene of the crime. Mack also apologizes for crying so much over the course of the weekend with Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu, saying that he hates that he is so full of tears. However, Papa says that tears are an important part of life and can be signs of joy as well as sadness. In these ways, God encourages Mack to face emotions that may be difficult.

In addition to allowing himself to feel a full range of emotions, it is important for Mack to try to understand why he feels what he does. Sarayu impresses upon Mack that part of the reason emotions can be so confusing is that they flow from perceptions, which are in turn shaped by certain paradigms or deeply-held beliefs. In order to understand why some emotions feel bad and to trust those that are useful, it is necessary for Mack to think about his own beliefs; he must learn to stop parsing what is "good" or "evil," and instead leave such judgments to God. Sarayu later gives Mack the ability to see as God sees, at which point he observes a group of human beings filled with light—children emit a white light, while a circle of adults surrounding them emit lights of various colors, reflecting their more complex range of emotions. One being's light is particularly erratic, reflecting his volatile emotional state; this turns out to be Mack's father, and only upon acknowledging the guilt and pain both men feel are they able to embrace and forgive each other.

Over the course of the weekend, Mack goes from feeling numb, to wishing he could eradicate the onrush of negative emotions he has excavated surrounding Missy's death, to realizing that it is necessary to feel, think about, and analyze the source of such negative emotions in order to turn them into something useful. After spending the weekend with Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus, Mack is able to do just that—to see the source of his emotions, both positive and negative, and understand how they influence his relationships and choices.



THE NATURE OF GOD

When Mack's daughter Missy is kidnapped and murdered, Mack can't stop thinking that God has abandoned him in his time of greatest need. A big part of why Mack initially suffers so much and feels so disconnected from God is that he labors under a number of false assumptions about the nature of God: he assumes that God is unsympathetic to Mack's life; he assumes that God abandons people in their times of need; and he assumes that God is calculating and vengeful, shaming and punishing people when they do wrong. By presenting himself in the unlikely form of three friendly strangers—God as a black woman named Papa, the Holy Spirit as an Asian woman named Sarayu, and Jesus as a carpenter—God breaks down those assumptions and shows Mack that God is a benevolent force that will always be with him and will never abandon him.

Mack is surprised to see God (Papa) as a black woman, because Mack had always vaguely pictured God as an old white man. Papa explains that it is important to break down his assumptions of what God looks like so Mack can move past his association of God with religious practices, which he has always felt uncomfortable with, and instead connect to God directly. Mack is similarly surprised that Jesus isn't more handsome. In response, Jesus says that attractiveness, like race and gender, is just a tool that Mack and other people use for judging one another. In this way, God points out that Mack's discomfort with God stems from preconceived notions about what God is like that mostly come from external sources, like his religious upbringing and society in general. The challenging of those notions starts to open the door for Mack to have a more personal relationship with God.

Mack also initially believes that God is cold and all-powerful, sometimes abandoning humans in their times of need. By appearing as three complementary personas, however, God challenges those assumptions. Papa explains that it is necessary for God to exist as three components so that love and relationships can exist within God. In this way, Young again shows that the way to achieve oneness with God is by embracing relationships, because God himself is comprised of a relationship between three beings.

The Trinity of God is also significant because it points to the way that God lives in human beings at all times. Mack always thought that God had abandoned Jesus when he was crucified on the cross, just as God had abandoned Missy. However, the nature of the three-part God is that these parts are never really separate from one another. Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus demonstrate this notion over the course of the weekend by showing Mack that a conversation he has with one of them is simultaneously perceived by the others. Furthermore, Papa has scars on her hands from when Jesus was nailed to the cross, demonstrating that God does not abandon humans in times of crisis. Papa's constant presence in Jesus is a way of

demonstrating that God lives in humans and is with them always. Because it is impossible for Papa to abandon Jesus, the human embodiment of God, it is impossible for God to abandon humans.

Mack is at first mistrustful of God because he perceives God as being an angry and vengeful force. Instead, God explains that he operates from a place of forgiveness, not vengeance. Mack worries that Missy's death was punishment for Mack poisoning his own father when he was young, and also that Papa caused Missy's death in order to teach Mack about faith. Papa explains that in both these cases, she is able to use pain for good—but that she doesn't cause such pain. When Mack asks Papa if she enjoys punishing those who disappoint her, she is adamant that her power doesn't work in that way. She tells Mack that the basis of God's relationship to all humans is love, not shame or vengeance.

At the beginning of *The Shack*, Mack does not trust God or let him into his life. However, this is largely because Mack misunderstands the nature of God, assuming that he is a vengeful, powerful force who punishes all who anger him. During his weekend at the shack with Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus, Mack comes to understand that God actually exists in three complementary parts, and that the basis of God is love and relationships. By having God deliberately appear in ways that challenge Mack's mental image of him, the novel highlights the misconceptions that Mack holds and argues that overcoming such narrow-minded or misguided assumptions is vital to understanding and embracing the true nature of divinity.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WATERFALLS

Waterfalls appear at key moments in *The Shack* as symbols of sacrifice, but they are also used to show the ways in which stories of sacrifice can be overly-simplified and give an impression of God as vengeful rather than forgiving. Mack's young daughter Missy, whose murder sets off the events in the story, loves waterfalls. She is drawn to the story of the Multnomah falls, in which a Native American princess receives word from the Great Spirit that she can save her tribe from a sickness by throwing herself from a waterfall. Like the parable of Jesus, the story of the Multnomah princess centers on an ordinary person choosing to sacrifice themselves in order to save others. Both stories also align with how Mack initially perceives God: as an all-powerful, calculating force who demands sacrifice and causes tragedies in order to bring good to the world.

When Missy visits Mack from the afterlife during his weekend at the shack, she appears from behind a waterfall, leading Mack to question whether God caused Missy's death in order to teach him about belief—whether her death was indeed a kind of sacrifice so that he could learn. But God, in the form of Papa, insists that this is not the case. She does not cause tragedy in order to balance things out or teach. Instead, she is able to take tragedies and use them for good. Evil and suffering exist in the world not because God demands punishment and sacrifice, but rather because humans turn away from God and choose to commit tragedies on their own. In this way, waterfalls show that some of Mack's preconceived ideas about God are oversimplified and rely on parables of good and evil, while the truth about God is more nuanced.



GARDENS

Gardens are used in *The Shack* to demonstrate the complexity of human emotions, as well as the necessity of feeling both pain and happiness. At the opening of the story, Mack is overwhelmed by a depression he thinks of as *The Great Sadness*, which prevents him from feeling much of anything and from appreciating the natural beauty around him, like softly falling snow or a moonlit lake. Mack suppresses his emotions so that he will not have to face his overwhelming guilt and sadness about the death of his daughter Missy.

Sarayu, an embodiment of the Holy Spirit, helps Mack to see that all emotions are worthy of being felt. She demonstrates this by taking him to a beautiful, wild garden, which includes poisonous plants as well as flowers. Just as "negative" emotions serve important roles, these thorny plants are important parts of the garden ecosystem, serving their own purpose and beautiful in their own way. Also like complex human emotions, the garden appears to those within it as overgrown and wild, but Sarayu explains that, from above, it appears as a fractal, a complicated, ordered pattern of repeating shapes. In the same way, however messy they may feel, emotions are actually not random but derive from a pattern of underlying beliefs. Understanding this can help Mack face his bad emotions as well as his good. That Sarayu, Jesus, and Papa help Mack bury Missy in the garden and plant a tree over her shows that although the sadness of her death will always be with him, so, too, will the joy of her life.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Windblown Media edition of *The Shack* published in 2007.

Foreword Quotes

“For almost two days, tied to the big oak at the back of the house, he was beaten with a belt and Bible verses every time his dad woke from a stupor and put down the bottle.”

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Mack's Father, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When Mack was a child, his father would become violently drunk and beat Mack, his mother, and his siblings. When Mack tried to confess his father's crimes in church, hoping to appeal to God for help, his father—deeply embedded in the church—caught wind and instead beat Mack for days with a Bible. This was an extremely formative moment in Mack's early life. It catalyzed his decision to run away from home, abandon his mother, and poison his father, an act that he felt marked him as guilty and deserving of retribution from God for the rest of his life. It also shows the ways in which being religious does not necessarily correlate to living a life that God would be proud of—a notion that Mack will explore in great detail during his time at the shack with Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus. Just because Mack's father is a seemingly devout, churchgoing man does not mean he's morally upright and knows how to treat his family members with the love and respect that they deserve; nor does his use of a Bible to beat his son make his abuse any less heinous. These contrasts point to the idea that following the ritual and traditions of institutionalized religion alone are not enough to truly live in God's wisdom. They are also the seeds of the disconnect that Mack later feels during his adult life with the church and God himself, because from an early age Mack associated God with violence and vengeance.

Chapter 1 Quotes

“When we're around family she seems to come out of her shell some, but then she disappears again. I just don't know what to do. I've been praying and praying that Papa would help us find a way to reach her but”—she paused again—“it feels like he isn't listening.”

Related Characters: Nan Phillips (speaker), Kate, Papa/Elousia, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

While Mack waits at home, kept inside by the snowstorm, Nan waits with their children at her sister's house. Kate, their daughter, has been distant ever since the death of her sister, Missy, and nothing seems to be able to lift her sadness. Like Mack, Kate has been increasingly withdrawn in the wake of Missy's death, refusing to talk about her feelings or reveal the guilt that drives her depression. Both Kate and Mack illustrate that grief can be intense and all-encompassing, especially if it is built on underlying emotions that remain buried. In order to start the process of healing, it is necessary to wade into the difficult emotions surrounding loss and talk about them with others, but Kate refuses to do so.

Nan's nickname for God, Papa, shows that unlike Mack, she has no problem recreating the kind of close personal relationship she might have with her father in a divine context. Nan's personal nickname for God illustrates her belief that it is possible to have a close and loving relationship with him. At the same time, she also harbors doubts about God and, like Mack, seems to feel that God can be fickle and even absent from her life in times of need.

Chapter 2 Quotes

“Shortly after the summer that Missy vanished, *The Great Sadness* had draped itself around Mack's shoulders like some invisible but almost tangibly heavy quilt. The weight of its presence dulled his eyes and stooped his shoulders. Even his efforts to shake it off were exhausting, as if his arms were sewn into its bleak folds of despair and he had somehow become part of it.”

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26-27

Explanation and Analysis

As the excitement of the winter storm fades, Mack feels the return of his depression—which he thinks of as a heavy and almost overwhelming force known as *The Great Sadness*. This passage shows the extent to which Mack's grief is present in every aspect of his life—even when he goes to sleep, and is haunted by nightmares about Missy's death.

For Mack, grief has triggered an all-encompassing depression which, rather than catalyzing a range of difficult emotions, has more of a numbing effect, keeping him from either enjoying life or confronting his pain head on. At the opening of the story, Mack accepts *The Great Sadness* as his new normal and the ever-present reality of his life. Trying to simply shake it off feels like a physical exertion of which Mack is not capable.

“Sweetheart, Jesus didn’t think his Daddy was mean. He thought his Daddy was full of love and loved him very much. His Daddy didn’t make him die. Jesus chose to die because he and his Daddy love you and me and everyone in the world. He saved us from our sickness, like the princess.”

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips (speaker), Papa/Elousia, Jesus, Missy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

While the family is camping, Missy is enchanted by the story of the Multnomah princess, who jumped off of a waterfall in order to save her tribe. When she asks Mack about parallels between that story and the story of Jesus, his answer reveals much about his own beliefs about the nature of God. While Mack does not think Jesus' father was “mean,” as Missy says, he does believe that God uses sacrifice and suffering to bring good to the world. He believes that God operates from a position of love for all humans, but he also believes God required death in order to heal humans of their sins. After Missy’s death, Mack will come to believe even more strongly that God is vengeful and that his love is counterbalanced, or even outweighed, by his demands for sacrifice and suffering. As demonstrated by Mack’s references to the story of Jesus, Mack’s assumption about the nature of God as a powerful and sometimes cruel deity is shaped by his upbringing with the stories of the scripture. Later, Mack will learn that these narratives are oversimplified and give a false impression of God as causing tragedies in order to bring positive outcomes.

Chapter 4 Quotes

As he walked between tents and trailers, he was praying and promising. He knew in his heart that promising things to God was rather dumb and irrational, but he couldn’t help it. He was desperate to get Missy back, and surely God knew where she was.

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Missy, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which Mack’s friend Willie narrates, Mack is frantic to find Missy, who has just disappeared from the campsite. Even though at times he feels distant from God, in his moment of need, Mack finds himself appealing to God for help. Yet his hesitation to do so demonstrates his underlying mistrust of God. Mack thinks it’s “dumb” and “irrational” to talk to God, because deep down, he thinks that God is cruel and does not care about his personal struggles.

Mack believes that God could intervene to stop pain and evil, but simply chooses not to because he is vengeful or perhaps even worse, does not care about the daily concerns of humans. He thinks of God as being very distant and aloof and therefore unlikely to intervene and alleviate his pain. Mack also believes that his relationship with God is not based on mutual love or respect, but exchange: if he offers up the right promises or prayers, perhaps God will deign to help him. These beliefs will soon lead Mack to feel bitter and abandoned, because any time he suffers, it seems to be an indication that God is choosing to punish him. Later, these assumptions will be challenged when he comes face-to-face with God, appearing as a black woman named Papa, at the shack.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Turning his eyes heavenward, he began screaming his anguished questions. “Why? Why did you let this happen? Why did you bring me here? Of all places to meet you—why here? Wasn’t it enough to kill my baby? Do you have to toy with me too?”

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips, Willie (speaker), Missy

Related Themes: **Page Number:** 80**Explanation and Analysis**

Deciding to follow the suggestion in the mysterious note claiming to be from Papa, Mack drives into the wilderness to return to the scene of Missy's kidnapping and murder, hoping despite himself that the note will actually lead him to meet God. When he finds only the abandoned shack where Missy's bloody dress was found, his bubbling feelings of anger towards God break the surface and spill out violently. Mack's anguished questions reveal that he believes God is entirely responsible for the tragedy of his daughter's death. Here, he asserts that God didn't just abandon Mack in his time of need, but actually *caused* his pain by killing Missy, perhaps because God is vengeful and cruel. The loss of his daughter has fundamentally shaken Mack's trust in God. He no longer uneasily prays to God but believe God is actively punishing him.

This is also important because God believes that not just spiritual relationships, but all relationships should be entered into freely without the corrupting influence of power dynamics or hierarchies.

“If you couldn’t take care of Missy, how can I trust you to take care of me?” There, he’d said it—the question that had tormented him every day of *The Great Sadness*. Mack felt his face flush angry red as he stared at what he now considered to be some odd characterization of God, and he realized his hands were knotted into fists.

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips (speaker), Missy, Papa/Elousia

Related Themes:  **Page Number:** 94**Explanation and Analysis**

In the kitchen, Papa has just told Mack that he should trust her and feel protected by her love—but he can't help but ask the painful question that has been on his mind since Missy's death, when his faith in God was deeply shaken. In this passage, he reveals that Missy's death has shaped his perception of the nature of God: now, he believes that God is responsible for the safety of every human, and tragedies like Missy's death are the result of God's negligence or malice. Papa's appearance as a warm, kind black woman clashes not just with Mack's expectations for the physical appearance of God, but also his ideas about God's demeanor and inner nature, which have been shaped by the death of his daughter.

This passage also illustrates the relationship between Mack's grief and his mistrust of God, something that Mack will begin to understand only slowly over the course of the weekend. In reality, much of Mack's depression is based on the fact that, since he no longer trusts God to bring justice and order to the universe, he holds himself responsible for Missy's death and for avenging her killer. The crushing weight of this responsibility, as well as the fear that Mack feels because he does not believe that God will protect him, are driving forces of *The Great Sadness*.

Chapter 6 Quotes

“Oh”—now Jesus was serious—“don’t go because you feel obligated. That won’t get you any points around here. Go because it’s what you want to do.”

Related Characters: Jesus (speaker), Papa/Elousia, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  **Page Number:** 91**Explanation and Analysis**

When Mack first arrives at the shack and meets the three personas of God—Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus—he is overwhelmed and unsure how to act around them. He feels that he should be deferent and accommodating in the presence of God, because he sees himself as a follower of God. In telling Mack that he should behave as he pleases and not feel obligated to follow Papa inside, Jesus hints at the true nature of the relationship between God and people, something that he will explore in more depth later. In order for faith to be meaningful, it must be given freely—in other words, Mack must follow God out of choice, not because he feels compelled to. Again and again, the three personas of God will explain to Mack that God gives people the choice of whether to heed him or not, because otherwise, their forced obedience would not be meaningful.

“For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me ‘Papa’ is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.”

Related Characters: Papa/Elousia (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Mack is surprised when he meets Papa, a warm, kind black woman, because he had always pictured God as cold and vaguely “Gandalf-like”—that is, a mysterious, old white man. As Papa explains here, the contrast between Mack’s mental image of God and how she has chosen to appear to him is a deliberate effort to shake his preconceived notions and prepare him for the deeper discrepancies that lie beneath the surface. Soon, Mack will realize that God operates in a completely different way from how he had imagined, which is reflected by the fact that God appears so differently from his mental image.

At the same time, Papa’s reference to Mack’s “religious conditioning” demonstrates that the filters of scripture and the church can sometimes obscure the relationship between God and people, complicating or getting in the way of their relationship. Over the course of the weekend the three parts of God—Papa (God), Sarayu (the Holy Spirit), and Jesus—will encourage Mack to push aside his religious upbringing in order to reach out and form a more personal, intimate relationship with God replicating the loving relationships in his day-to-day life.

Chapter 7 Quotes

¶¶ So this was God in relationship? It was beautiful and so appealing. He knew that it didn’t matter whose fault it was—the mess from some bowl that had been broken, that a planned dish would not be shared. Obviously, what was truly important here was the love they had for one another and the fullness it brought them. He shook his head. How different this was from the way he sometimes treated the ones he loved!

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Jesus, Papa/Elousia, Sarayu, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

As Papa prepares dinner, Jesus drops a bowl of sauce, making a mess in the kitchen. But rather than creating tensions—as it did when Mack tried to prepare a meal at the

campsite with his children, and lost his temper at them—the incident brings Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu to laughter. Mack watches transfixed as preparations for the meal continue. As Papa explains, the Trinity exists as three separate people in part so that they can embody and demonstrate a perfect relationship. In a perfect relationship, love is at the center, while power, anger, and judgement have no place. By observing the relationship contained within God, Mack wonders if he could bring some of their dynamic back to the relationships in his own life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

¶¶ He let out a deep, heavy sigh. And if God was really here, why hadn’t he taken his nightmares away?

Related Characters: Willie (speaker), Missy, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

During his first night in the cabin, Mack is plagued by a nightmare about Missy’s death that plays on his feelings of guilt and sadness over her loss. Upon waking, Mack wonders why God can’t simply eliminate his nightmares altogether—especially now that Mack is at a cabin with God himself. This thought reflects Mack’s early perceptions of his emotions and the ways he thinks about solutions to his grief. Initially, Mack believes that the negative emotions associated with his daughter’s loss—in other words, *all* the emotions associated with it—are unequivocally bad, and that the best way to deal with them is by suppressing or eliminating these feelings altogether. However, trying to push down these emotions is keeping Mack from examining the thoughts and feelings at the heart of his depression, which is preventing him from beginning to heal. Simultaneously, Mack’s expectation that God should simply take away his pain for him reflects his early belief that God’s role in his life is to mete out justice and punishment as he sees fit.

“There is a lot to be mad about in the mess my kids have made and in the mess they’re in. I don’t like a lot of the choices they make, but that anger—especially for me—is an expression of love all the same. I love the ones I am angry with just as much as those I’m not.”
“But—” Mack paused. “What about your wrath?”

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips, Papa/Elousia (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

As Papa prepares breakfast, Mack asks questions that reveal the disconnect between how he perceives God and how Papa actually behaves. Mack has come to believe that God frequently (and harshly) punishes people who stray from his path, because Mack can find no other way to rationalize the unjust death of his daughter, Missy. He believes that God is “wrathful,” using his power and knowledge to mete out suffering in accordance to some personal system of justice. Papa, on the other hand, explains that love is at the center of her relationship to all people on Earth, regardless of what they have done. She also points to the fact that suffering and evil are not caused by her but rather by people making “choices,” something she will explain to Mack in more detail later. Though she is primarily explaining that the relationship between God and humans is one based on love, Papa is also pointing to the ways that humans’ independence from her have allowed them to bring suffering to the world, rather than that suffering being caused by God as punishment.

“What you’re seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don’t need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us.”

Related Characters: Sarayu (speaker), Papa/Elousia, Jesus, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 124

Explanation and Analysis

At breakfast, Mack asks Papa, Sarayu, and Jesus which one of them is in charge. They are thrown by his question,

teasing him a little because to them the concept seems utterly absurd. Sarayu, the embodiment of the Holy Spirit, gently explains that in a perfect relationship, mutual love and not fear or power hold people together. Because the relationship among the Trinity is meant to be an example of perfect love, they do not allow the tainting influence of a hierarchy to creep in. Sarayu explains that therefore, power dynamics—which usually lead to one person being abused, or, on a larger scale, cause violence and war—are a human creation stemming from the fact that people have strayed from God.

Chapter 9 Quotes

“Your question presumes that poison is bad, that such creations have no purpose. Many of these so-called bad plants, like this one, contain incredible properties for healing or are necessary for some of the most magnificent sonders when combined with something else. Humans have a great capacity for declaring something good or evil, without truly knowing.”

Related Characters: Sarayu (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Mack joins Sarayu in her garden, a beautiful collection of jumbled, wild-looking plants with hidden order to it. Just as Mack woke up wishing he could eliminate the negative emotions brought on by a nightmare, his first thought upon entering the garden is that it should be rid of poisonous plants. Sarayu uses that garden as a metaphor for the tangled emotions in Mack’s soul, and explains that, just as poisonous plants serve important functions in the ecosystem of the garden, so, too, do negative emotions play important roles.

Furthermore, Mack’s constant judgements—of plants, God, other people, and even his own emotions—show how he, like all of humanity, has strayed from God. Taking on the role of judge and deciding what is good or evil is equivalent to playing God, because it makes people feel righteous in hurting and punishing one another based on subjective, fallible human judgement. If humans trusted that God is the only true fair judge of all, they would recognize that everything has its own place in the universe, including

things they perceive as harmful, like poisonous plants.

“To be honest,” said Mack, “I tend to sound justifiably angry when somebody is threatening my ‘good,’ you know, what I think I deserve. But I’m not really sure I have any logical ground for deciding what is actually good or evil, except how something or someone affects me.”

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips (speaker), Sarayu

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 136

Explanation and Analysis

Continuing their discussion on judgement of good and evil in Sarayu’s garden, Mack explains how he determines what is evil. In fact, as he comes to realize, these assessments are not founded on an objective standard of right and wrong, as Mack initially thought. Rather, Mack, like all humans, assess right and wrong only based on how things affect him personally. Without the perspective of God, all humans who attempt to judge good and evil are doomed to operate based on a subjective view of others, labelling things as “evil” merely because they find them personally inconvenient or troubling. Because everyone then has their own subjective view of right and wrong, this opens the way for judgement, conflict, fighting, and even war. This is an important moment of realization for Mack, because he begins to see that he is burdening himself with the weight of judgement that should rest only on God.

Chapter 10 Quotes

“It is your desperate attempt to get some control over something you can’t. It is impossible for you to take power over the future because it isn’t even real, nor will it ever be real. You try to play God, imagining the evil that you fear becoming reality, and then you try to make plans and contingencies to avoid what you fear.”

Related Characters: Jesus (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Mack joins Jesus outside for lunch, and is taken aback when Jesus invites him to try to walk across the surface of the lake with him. He realizes that he can’t stop imagining everything that might go wrong, leading him to imagine a future for himself without God’s help and guidance. In this way, Jesus helps Mack to see another way in which his separation from God is related to his depression, *The Great Sadness*. In trying to imagine future outcomes, Mack is burdening himself with the impossible responsibility of predicting the future, something that only God can know. Because he does not trust that God will take care of him, his mind plays out worst-case-scenario options and he assumes that they will befall him. The weight of these fears consequently feeds into Mack’s depression and reinforces his mistrust of God, because he assumes the world around him as well as his own future is rife with lurking dangers that God will not protect him from. A negative personal consequence of declaring independence from God is that it robs humans of the comfort of trusting that God will help them in the future.

“The world is broken because in Eden you abandoned relationship with us in order to assert your own independence. Most men have expressed it by turning to the work of their hands and the sweat of their brows to find their identity, value, and security.”

Related Characters: Jesus (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 148

Explanation and Analysis

As they sit by the lake, Jesus explains to Mack the roots of the disconnect he and many humans now have from God. He also explicates another way in which power dynamics and hierarchies have come to infect human relationships, in contrast to the perfectly equal relationship exemplified by the Trinity. First of all, Jesus states plainly that all problems in the world derive from the fact that humans chose to break from God. God allowed humans to have independence so that their love and faith would come freely. However, this also means that humans were free to turn away from God and begin judging and fighting among

themselves. This turn took place in the Garden of Eden, Jesus explains, but continues to today. Humans rejected the idea that it was possible to form a relationship with God, and instead turned towards one another for relationships and leadership.

This has led to a number of problematic power dynamics, as the other members of the Trinity have already explained to Mack. Another way in which human relationships have become infected by hierarchy is through gender: after the Fall, Jesus says here, men turned towards their own work to find value and security, while women turned towards their relationships with men. In this way, men asserted dominance over women, even though God always intended for men and women to be equals. If both men and women placed God at the center of their value systems, and turned to him for security and guidance, it would alleviate the abuse of power between men and women. Mack finds this helpful for understanding his own relationship with his wife, Nan.

Chapter 12 Quotes

 “Mack, that’s because you’re seeing only the institution, a man-made system. That’s not what I came to build. What I see are people and their live, a living, breathing community of all those who love me, not buildings and programs.”

Related Characters: Jesus (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Jesus wistfully describes a beautiful woman he is in love with, and Mack is surprised and confused to realize that Jesus is actually talking about the Christian church. Mack asks why the church as he knows it doesn't seem to bear any resemblance to the beautiful vision Jesus describes. Jesus describes that, just as power and judgement have tainted human relationships, humans have inadvertently warped their relationship to God by imposing the rules, rituals, and judgements of the formal church. These organizations allow humans to judge one another for being more or less devout, when in fact they are simply imposing an artificial bureaucracy on the relationship between people and God. Jesus says that the trappings of religion—buildings, programs, scripture—are not as important as the personal, individualized relationship that each person can form with God. In fact, Mack's own upbringing shows that people

often let the trappings of the church guide them more than a personal sense of faith.

Chapter 13 Quotes

 “Mack, just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don’t ever assume that my using something means I caused it or that I needed it to accomplish my purposes.”

Related Characters: Papa/Elousia (speaker), Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

Chatting on the porch with Papa, Mack realizes he has lingering doubts about the true nature of God. Thinking about how God allowed him to see Missy from behind a waterfall, Mack is reminded of the story of the Multnomah princess—which makes him wonder whether God allowed or willed Missy to die in order for Mack to come to the cabin and learn. He still can't shake his long-held suspicion that God demands suffering and sacrifice in order to bring good to the world. Just as the stories of Jesus and the Multnomah princess are about people making sacrifices in order to benefit the greater good, Mack worries that Papa demanded Missy's sacrifice for Mack's sake.

In this passage, Papa reminds Mack once and for all that she does not operate in this way. The relationship between God and people is not based on fear or power, because God does not use tragedies to punish people. Instead, Papa says, God uses the tragedies and evil that humans create and works them into something good and beautiful. This important distinction points to the reasons why Mack does not trust God, and shows that even after all his conversations at the cabin, some of Mack's bitter beliefs about God's nature still linger.

Chapter 16 Quotes

 “Forgiveness is first for you, the forgiver,” answered Papa, “to release you from something that will eat you alive, that will destroy your joy and your ability to love fully and openly. Do you think this man cares about the pain and torment you have gone through?”

Related Characters: Papa/Elousia (speaker), Missy, Mackenzie Allen Phillips

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

On his final day at the cabin, Papa, assuming the form of an old man, takes Mack through the woods to the spot where Missy's killer hid her body. Before they can enter the cave, Papa says that there is one more thing Mack must do—forgive Missy's killer. As Papa explains, forgiveness is absolutely essential to relationships: not because Mack will be able to (or have desire to) form a relationship with Missy's killer once he forgives him, but because holding onto his pain, judgement, and desire for revenge is hindering Mack's ability to heal and form relationships with others. As long as Mack holds onto his anger, he will be unable to love others fully. Failing to forgive hurts not only his relationship to other people, but also his relationship to God, because judgement of the guilty should be reserved for God alone. By clinging to his desire for revenge, Mack is tacitly saying that he does not trust God to deliver final judgement to Missy's killer, which means he also cannot truly trust God to love or protect Mack himself. Importantly, if Mack forgives Missy's killer, he will not lose the pain of her death or anger over the atrocity of her murder. Instead, he will begin to forgive himself for her loss, allowing *The Great Sadness* to lift and his relationships to heal. Furthermore, Mack will be able to recognize that God still loves and protects him despite the evil in the world.

reflects the ways in which the weekend has transformed his ideas about belief and the nature of God. Previously, Mack believed that God sometimes abandoned humans, especially when they needed him most. But now, Mack feels that God is ever-present. The Trinitarian nature of the God Mack encountered at the cabin—with three inseparable elements, one of them fully human but still fully God (Jesus)—means that God can never truly be apart from humanity. Furthermore, the kindness of God has dislodged Mack's long-held fear that God is uncaring and might turn his back on humanity. Though Mack is being lighthearted in this moment, the answer also shows the evolution of Mack's feelings towards God over the course of the book: where initially he was suspicious and angry about the idea of contact with God, now, the knowledge of God's presence is comforting for Mack.

 Mack interrupted with a hand on her arm. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, honey. It wasn't your fault." Kate sobbed as her father's words penetrated her war-ravaged heart. "But I've always thought it was my fault."

Related Characters: Kate, Mackenzie Allen Phillips (speaker), Sarayu, Missy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 246

Explanation and Analysis

Just before Mack left the cabin, Sarayu gave him an unusual gift: she revealed that his daughter Kate holds herself responsible for Missy's death. Like Mack himself, Kate's unspoken guilt about the death of Missy has plagued her heart, locking her in an intense depression. Kate believes she is responsible for Missy's death but, like Mack before his weekend with God, she refuses to fully acknowledge her guilt or speak about it with others. If she did, she would realize that no one holds her responsible, and that they would forgive her even if they did. Recognizing this because of his own transformative journey through grief, Mack forces her to name her guilt. Though it is initially traumatic for Kate to have to admit her feelings, the moment is also clearly cathartic and almost immediately she seems less withdrawn. Like Mack, Kate learns that it is necessary to voice the difficult emotions underlying depression in order to begin healing.

Chapter 18 Quotes

 Mack was amused. "Willie," he whispered, "it's not a secret. God is everywhere. So, I was at the shack."

Related Characters: Mackenzie Allen Phillips (speaker), Jesus, Willie

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 243

Explanation and Analysis

As Mack is recovering in the hospital after his weekend in the shack, Willie visits and quietly asks whether Mack did indeed meet God like the note promised. Mack's answer



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

FOREWORD

Willie, the narrator, believes anyone would be skeptical upon hearing that someone spent a weekend with God, in “the shack” no less. He then says that he has been friends with Mack for more than two decades. As is family tradition, Mack, whose full name is Mackenzie Allen Phillips, goes by Allen, and is only called Mack by close friends and his wife, Nan.

Willie’s assertion that most people would be skeptical of Mack’s claim reflects the fact that many people perceive God to be far removed from their lives and concerns, unlikely to take a personal interest in their struggles. The fact that only a few close friends call Mack by his preferred name indicates that he is reserved and sometimes has a hard time forming relationships and making himself emotionally available to others.



Mack was born to an Irish-American family in the Midwest, and his “overly-strict church elder” father was a vicious drunk. When thirteen-year-old Mack tearfully confessed in church that he had seen his father beat his mother, his father caught word. His father tied him to an oak tree and beat him with a belt and Bible verses for two days. As soon as Mack recovered enough to walk, he left home, taking his prized possessions with him, including a family picture and an ounce of his mother’s perfume. He poisoned all of the alcohol he could find on the farm and left his mother a note under her pillow hoping she would someday forgive him.

For the next few years, Mack travelled around the world, working odd jobs and even getting involved in a distant war, though he “hated war with a dark passion.” He also briefly attended seminary in Australia before returning to the U.S. in his twenties, when made peace with his mother and sisters, moved to Oregon, and married Nannette A. Samuelson.

Mack’s father is devout on the surface, serving as an elder in the church, raising his son in the church, and carrying a Bible. But his abusive behavior show that while he adheres to the trappings of a religious life, he does not treat those around him as God would want. His relationships do not reflect a true faith even though he demonstrates a loyalty to the bureaucracy of the church. Mack’s angry departure, and attempt to poison his father, show his judgment of his father’s actions.



Since then, Mack, who is about to turn fifty-six, has settled down, raising five kids with his wife Nan. He is unremarkable looking and wouldn’t stand out in a crowd, though he is very kind and smart. He is also odd; people find him uncomfortably perceptive, and he’s fascinated by God and belief, though he has a “love/hate relationship with religion” and appears uncomfortable in church on the rare Sundays he attends.

As Mack traveled around the world, he saw tragedies and darkness like war, which confirmed his belief that God takes little concern with the affairs of humans, allowing—or perhaps even causing—death and suffering. The fact that Mack eventually reconciled with his family suggests the importance of forgiveness in healthy relationships, and Mack’s own capacity for such acts of forgiveness.



These two sides of Mack—the side that is fascinated by God and the side that is uncomfortable with religion and church—show that having a relationship with God is separate from being devout and following the rituals of the formal church. The book suggests that this is because the church is a human-created bureaucracy, while anyone, even an ordinary person like Mack, can develop a personal relationship with God.



Ever since a hospital stay a few years ago, Mack has seemed particularly kind and at peace. His relationship with God has “gone deep,” though he has paid for such a “dive.” After *The Great Sadness* of seven years ago, Mack and Willie rarely saw each other. After the accident, however, Mack asked Willie to help him write about his experiences. Willie insists that he has recorded Mack’s memories as truthfully as he could.

When Mack was deep in a depression he thought of as *The Great Sadness*, he cut himself off from others and his relationships suffered, all side effects of the intense grief he felt at the loss of his daughter. Since confronting his emotions, however, Mack has been able to heal and deepen his relationships with both other people in his life, and God.



CHAPTER 1: A CONFLUENCE OF PATHS

On a cold March day, Mack is working from his home office as icy rain builds up a slippery layer outside. He reflects on the calming qualities of nature, thinking that the beauty of the snow-covered world is almost enough to lift *The Great Sadness*.

The numbness that Mack feels as a result of the loss of his daughter is somewhat self-protective in that it keeps the memory of her loss alive. However, it also keeps him from feeling positive emotions and noticing the good things in life like the beauty of a winter day.



Knocking ice from the mailbox, Mack finds only a single envelope inside. It is unstamped and contains a simple message. The letter writer says that he has missed Mack and that he will be at the shack next weekend if Mack wants to meet up. It is signed simply “Papa.” Wondering if the letter is a prank, Mack feels angry and unsettled.

Mack is deeply unsettled by a letter that appears to be from God because he pictures God as being aloof and far-removed from his day-to-day concerns, and also because he harbors anger at God for allowing what happened to Missy. Rather than attributing such a message to divine intervention, Mack assumes it is the product of human cruelty. He does not trust in God’s closeness.



As he is making his way back from the mailbox, Mack slips on an icy patch of driveway. He falls backwards and skids along the ice, tearing open a gash in the back of his head. Inside, Mack cleans and dresses the wound as best he can, feeling a throbbing pain and hoping that his wife Nan, a registered nurse, will be home soon.

Mack has a close relationship with his family, but still, he tends to keep to himself and doesn’t reach out to others for help, even when he is in distress, like when he falls in the driveway. Mack has difficulty opening up to others, which can sometimes keep him from getting the support that he needs.



Unable to forget about the note, Mack calls the post office and finds out, to his surprise, that the mail has not yet been delivered to his home. Groggy from his wound, he falls asleep by the phone for a few hours before being awakened by a call from Nan. Nan is with their daughter Kate at her sister’s house, and says she’ll stay the night there since it’s too icy to drive home. Nan is worried about getting through to Kate. She says she’s been praying to Papa—her favorite nickname for God—for ideas about how to get through to her, but it feels like he isn’t listening. Mack feels a lingering sense of confusion and pain about the note. He curls up on the sofa to watch some news, but soon falls asleep.

Unlike Mack, Nan thinks of God as being an accessible, benevolent figure in her life—more of a friend or father figure than a distant ruler. Nan recognizes that it is possible to have a direct and comfortable relationship with God, as demonstrated by her nickname for him, Papa. Also unlike Mack, she believes that God is directly interested in the affairs of humans and will turn to him for advice (even though it can feel hard to get through to him).



CHAPTER 2: THE GATHERING DARK

The next day, the storm has thawed and Mack's family returns. He thinks that the storm served as a welcome, but brief, distraction from *The Great Sadness*, which is the name he uses to refer to the overwhelming despair he has felt since the summer Missy vanished. The heavy weight of *The Great Sadness* follows Mack no matter what he does, tinging his daily experiences, giving him nightmares and flooding him with pain and guilt.

The narrator shares the story of Missy's disappearance. The story of Missy's disappearance began when Mack takes Missy, his youngest daughter, and her older siblings Kate and Josh camping. Excitement grips the family as they prepare for the trip. Soon, they set off for the Oregon wilderness.

On the way, the family stops at Multnomah Falls and Missy asks Mack to tell her favorite story, about a princess of the Multnomah Native American tribe. In the story, a mysterious disease has struck many young warriors, killing them swiftly. One elder says that his own father foretold such a sickness and proclaimed that a pure and innocent daughter of a chief would have to voluntarily sacrifice her life by jumping from a **waterfall** in order to stop the sickness. When her betrothed fell ill, the Multnomah princess prayed to the Great Spirit and jumped to her death. The sickness was lifted, and a beautiful pool formed where her body fell. Missy usually loves the story, but this time, she is silent.

That night, the family sets up camp and enjoys dinner and stargazing together. Mack prays with Josh and goes to do the same with Kate and Missy, but instead Missy is perturbed and asks some questions about the story from earlier. She asks if the story is true, and if the Great Spirit is another name for God, Jesus's Papa. Mack is pleased by the question and says that he thinks so. Missy asks why the Great Spirit is so mean—he made the Princess jump and Jesus die on the cross—but Mack says Jesus chose to die to save people.

Just as Mack thinks his daughters have fallen asleep, Missy asks if God will ever ask her to jump off a cliff. The question fills Mack's eyes with tears. He assures her that nothing like that will happen, and they say goodnight.

Mack's grief takes the form of *The Great Sadness*, which keeps him from letting go of the memory of Missy and her death, but also keeps him from experiencing anything joyful. The beauty of a storm and the pain of an injury are just short interludes in an existence otherwise completely clouded over by grief and guilt.



Mack's memories of a happier time show the strength of his relationship with his family members. Mack has special and unique relationships with each of his children and enjoys spending time with them.



The story that Mack tells presents one idea about how a higher power might relate to humans, suggesting that God or the Great Spirit demands sacrifice and suffering in order to heal. A relationship with this kind of God is predicated on sacrifice and exchange. In this view of the relationship between people and their deities, God only intervenes to help lift suffering if people demonstrate their loyalty through more pain and sacrifice.



Missy's questions and Mack's answers also support a version of God that asks people to choose pain and suffering in order to gain his protection. For Mack, this vision of God makes sense, because he believes that the story of Jesus is about Jesus choosing to die to help people when God abandoned him. But Missy thinks that a God who demands such sacrifices is cruel. Their conversation foreshadows Mack's evolving understanding of the nature of God over the course of the novel.



Even though Mack believes abstractly that God demands sacrifices in order to bring good to the world, he does not believe that such difficult choices will ever come to affect him personally, perhaps because he sees God as far removed from his life.



CHAPTER 3: THE TIPPING POINT

Over the next few days on their camping trip, Mack and his family make friends with two other families—the Ducettes, who have two young girls about Kate and Josh's ages; and the Madisons, a Canadian couple. Together, they take a tram up to a mountain lookout. Carrying Missy on the way back, Mack wonders why his kids have to grow up.

That evening, the families all enjoy a cookout together. Later, while the kids are off playing and the Ducette parents have gone to bed, the Madisons ask Mack about Nan. He tells them about his beautiful wife and her work with terminal cancer patients, helping them to develop a closer relationship with God—like the relationship Nan herself has. Even though the conversation has gotten a bit personal for Mack's taste, he lets slip that he doesn't feel as close with God as Nan does, and also that his own father had mistreated him before his death.

The next morning, Mack and the kids begin cleaning up the campsite. Frustrated by several mishaps, Mack finds himself snapping at his children. As Kate and Josh go to play in the Ducette's canoe one last time, Mack watches Missy coloring at the table.

Josh and Kate try to wave at Mack from the canoe, but they flip it over in the process. Kate emerges quickly, but Josh stays under. Full of adrenaline, Mack runs to the water and dives in to find that Josh's life vest is caught in the canoe, trapping him under. After a couple of attempts, Mack is able to flip the canoe and use mouth-to-mouth to bring Josh back to consciousness. He knows God is responsible and feels relieved that the crisis has been averted.

Even before his encounter with God, Mack sees love and relationships as the central and most important aspects of his life, as demonstrated by his devotion to his children and the ease with which he becomes friendly with others.



Mack explicates the different approaches that he and Nan take in their respective relationships to God. Nan is able to see God as a friend or parent, relating to him closely. But Mack has never been able to achieve that closeness, perhaps because of his troubled relationship to his own "religious" father. Mack has a harder time extending the trust and love he has for his direct family members to God himself. That trouble forming a close bond with God is reflected by his guardedness in relating to other people, even those whom he likes, such as the Madisons.



Mack loves his children and their family dynamic is dominated by that care, as demonstrated by simple moments like Mack watching Missy color. At the same time, Mack will sometimes become distracted by frustrations, letting his annoyance or judgment get the better of him and cloud over family interactions.



Mack sees God as an all-powerful being who sometimes chooses to intervene when he sees tragedies are about to happen. In this view, it logically follows that tragedies that do happen must be caused by God willfully ignoring, or even causing them. This outlook helps Mack to feel a sense of appreciation and closeness with God when tragedies are narrowly avoided, as when he saves Josh from drowning. But it also means that Mack thinks that God is responsible when tragedies do happen.



CHAPTER 4: THE GREAT SADNESS

As Mack catches his breath, he suddenly remembers Missy had been up at the campsite coloring. But when he goes to find her, she isn't there. At first, Mack hopes she is somewhere close by. But as the Madisons and Ducettes help him search further and further from the campsite, he begins to panic. He begins praying and making promises to God in hopes that she might be close. Surely, he thinks, God will know where Missy is.

Mack starts making promises to God because he believes that god expects sacrifice from him in order to avert tragedies, just like in his telling of the stories of Jesus or the Multnomah princess. Mack believes that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, but will only intervene on Mack's behalf if he offers something in return. Mack's relationship with God is predicated on an exchange: like many, Mack believes that God will help him if he offers up prayers or promises in return.



As the search spreads out to the whole camp grounds, one camper tells Mack that he saw a little girl in a red dress in the back of a green truck leaving the campsite. She had been crying, and a man pushed her down. Mack and his friends hail the police and, over the next few hours, the search escalates. The FBI get involved and Nan begins making her way to the campsite.

Officers ask Mack to look back over the campsite to see if he notices anything amiss. He sees a ladybug pin sticking out of the book, which he is sure doesn't belong to Missy. Officer Tommy Dalton phones the FBI field office in Portland, where an Officer asks him about the pin. Mack insists on listening in. After hearing a description of the pin from Officer Dalton, the FBI officer says that the pin matches the description of the trademark of a serial killer known as "Little Ladykiller." He has abducted and killed four children under the age of ten; the five dots on the ladybug pin indicated that Missy might be his fifth victim. Listening in, Mack is awash with horror and despair, thinking of all the memories of his little daughter and wondering how something like this could happen.

That evening, Nan arrives at the nearby hotel where the family is waiting and officers have set up a temporary headquarters. The couple tearfully embraces and spend a restless night waiting in vain for news. Everything feels meaningless and gray. The next day, Nan and the kids prepare to head home, while Mack prepares to stay close by with investigators.

The Madisons and Ducettes both work to comfort the family and help in any way they can. Everyone parts tearfully. They feel shaken and bonded by the shared traumatic experience of Missy's disappearance and promise to pray for her return.

Even though Mack associates the good and bad in his life with the will of God, Missy's kidnapping is clearly the work of a person choosing to commit evil. In this horrible time, Mack turns to his relationship with his wife Nan for strength.



Mack's worldview is predicated on his belief that all evil exist because God wills it or allows it. So when he hears about the horrible atrocities committed by the serial killer, he doesn't understand why or how such a person could exist. Mack sees evil as originating from God, so its existence and presence in his life is especially horrible, because it suggests that God intentionally caused him harm. He does not see evil acts like those committed by the serial killer as working against God's plan, because his understanding of an all-powerful God means it must be part of God's plan.



Already, Mack's overwhelming grief, which takes the form of a constant numbness, has begun to set in. Mack's grief protects him by keeping him from having to face the enormity of his loss, but it also turns the world into a monochromatic, pointless place.



Even though negative emotions can be traumatic and difficult, sharing them and processing them with others can bring people closer together, even in the darkest times. The book suggests that this is one of the benefits of having open, honest relationships, and one of the unexpected positive outcomes of sharing difficult emotions.



FBI Officers, including Sam, who had identified the ladybug pin over the phone, arrive at the site. Sam and Mack take a liking to one another. Sam questions Mack about the past few days, asking if he had seen anyone suspicious or had noticed a truck matching the description of the one that Missy was spotted in. Feeling helpless, Mack says he hadn't noticed anything.

That evening, the officers get word that some hikers saw a vehicle matching the truck's description near a national forest. Inside, a suspicious looking man with a low hat had leaned down to avoid being seen. After some debate, the officers unanimously agree to set out in pursuit. Their intense attitudes seem to reflect a universal belief in the innocence of children and the horror of crimes against them. Setting out with Tommy, Mack prays to God to keep Missy safe.

Over the next few hours, Mack joins the FBI officers as they canvass the woods near where the truck had been spotted. Close to dawn, one officer finds a green paint-splattered hubcap, and then, the truck, hidden down a side road under a lean-to of tree limbs and brush. Deeper in the woods, police dogs find an old two-room shack that had once belonged to a settler. Sam asks Mack to identify something they've found in the shack. Bolstered by Tommy on one side and Emil Ducette on the other, Mack walks to the shack. When he sees what Sam wanted him to identify, he breaks down immediately: it is missy's red dress, torn and blood-soaked.

Over the next three and a half years, the family struggles to return to some semblance of normalcy, especially Kate, who has retreated behind a wall, and Mack, who blames himself for the tragedy. Missy's body has never been recovered, but she is presumed dead. Mack feels a growing sense of separation from God.

Even in the midst of the pain and stress of Missy's disappearance, Mack is bolstered by the kindness of a stranger, Sam. These interactions show the importance of accepting help and support from others.



The fact that everyone present seems to immediately and instinctually agree that children are sacred and crimes against them are heinous suggests that Missy's kidnapper is choosing to perform a universally acknowledged evil, in contradiction to a natural or God-ordered system of justice. In other words, Missy's kidnapper must have strayed from God's plan for the world to commit an act that everyone agrees is evil. Mack again demonstrates his belief that God will intervene to stop bad things from happening if he offers up sacrifice in return. Mack hopes that God will help him, which means he will also feel abandoned if God does not.



The kindness of Tommy, Emil, and others shows the capacity of love and relationships to help ease suffering even in the worst times. And yet Mack's breakdown makes clear that even such support cannot totally alleviate intense pain.



Kate and Mack have both been consumed by their grief, and, in different ways, are stuck on the tragedy that rocked the family years ago, unable to move on or experience more positive emotions because of their guilt and sadness. Because he believed God would save him from the tragedy of Missy's loss, and God did not, Mack now feels that God has abandoned him and does not care about him.



Now, Mack reflects on the note in the mailbox. It feels like a cruel joke that God would ask him to meet at the shack, the epicenter of the painful memory. And receiving a note from God also clashed with Mack's theological understanding, which held that God could only be encountered through highly mediated scriptures. At the same time, Mack knows that simply attending church isn't working for him anymore. He wants more.

Mack believes it would be impossible for him to receive a note from God because of some assumptions he has about faith and his relationship to God. First of all, Mack believes that God is far removed from the daily struggles of people like him, and that it is foolish to believe God would reach out to him personally. Second, Mack believes that his relationship to God is defined by and exists only within the confines of the formal church.



CHAPTER 5: GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

Unsure if the note is from God, a prankster, or even Missy's killer, Mack nonetheless finds that he can't stop thinking about it and decides to make plans to go to the shack the next weekend. Luckily, Nan decides to take the kids out to visit her family that weekend so that Kate can see her brother-in-law, a psychologist.

Although Mack is close with his wife, he doesn't tell her the truth about the note because it feels easier to keep his doubts about the note writer's identity to himself. Mack believes it may be easier to confront such emotions alone, and seems to think that in doing so he is also protecting Nan from experiencing the pain and doubts that he is.



Mack asks his friend Willie if he can borrow Willie's Jeep for the journey into the woods. Willie agrees, but insists on first learning what Mack is up to. Reluctantly, Mack shows him the note, and says that he thinks it might actually be from God—even though both men agree that such a communication doesn't fit in with how they usually think about God.

Like Mack, Willie subscribes to a view of God as a distant, somewhat cold supernatural force, far removed from his daily concerns.



Mack says that despite himself, he feels like the missive really could be from God. That's in part because he's desperate: he worries that he's losing Kate, and that Missy's death was punishment for what he did to his father.

Mack believes that God causes tragedies like Missy's death in order to teach lessons or mete out punishments for other crimes. In this way, he views God as vengeful and transactional.



Willie reluctantly lets Mack leave with the Jeep, but not before convincing him to take a gun. Willie is worried that Mack lied to Nan—the couple never keeps secrets from each other, he says. As Mack leaves, Willie says that he will pray for his friend, and Mack thinks that he needs all the prayers he can get.

Willie points out that, in avoiding sharing his confusion about the note with Nan, Mack injected an element of mistrust into their relationship.



Mack retraces the drive from a few years before, trying not to think of the previous visit to Multnomah falls and Missy's disappearance. He feels as if he is driving straight into the heart of *The Great Sadness*, and the closer he gets, the more intense his desire to turn back.

Mack's grief and depression center around his desire not to let go of the past but instead to dwell in Missy's loss, so driving into the scene of the crime exacerbates his feelings of pain and emptiness.



Mack parks at the trailhead, about a mile from the shack itself. Panic overwhelms him, but so does a compulsion to push onwards. Shakily, he grabs the gun and a picture of Missy, thinking that at least if he dies those who find him will know he was thinking of her. Every rustle in the bushes feels like either a mortal threat or a sign of God himself. As he approaches the shack, it seems almost like a twisted, demonic face.

Mack enters the shack, which seems to be empty save for some old furniture. His eyes are drawn to a faded but still visible bloodstain near the fireplace. The sight of it fills him with anguish. He starts yelling and destroying the furniture, asking why God would bring him there and why he allowed Missy to die. He yells "I hate you!" and, touching the bloodstain, apologizes over and over again to Missy. Angry at God, he yells that God has never been there for him, even when he needed him most.

As *The Great Sadness* descends, Mack considers suicide, thinking that it would be a release from the pain and a final way to spite God. But he does not want to cause his family any more hurt. Rousing himself from the floor, tells God that he's done trying to find him. Wearily, he starts back towards the car.

As Mack starts to walk away from the cabin, the snowy winter forest around him begins to transform: the snow melts and flowers and grasses begin to bloom. Within seconds, it looks like high spring and the air is heavy with the fragrance of flowers. He turns to see that the shack, too, has transformed into a beautiful log cabin. With mingled feelings of awe, fear, and, still, lingering anger, he approaches the cabin and prepares to knock.

Before he can knock, the door is swept open by a large African American woman who sweeps Mack into a hug. She tells him excitedly that she's delighted to see him and that she loves him. Mack is in shock. He notices that her floral scent reminds him of his mother, and he feels tears welling up in his eyes. As he fights his emotions, she takes his gun and puts it aside.

Everything about Mack's trip to the shack so far, starting with the note in his mailbox, has shaken his sense of who God is and how He operates. Now, as Mack approaches the ostensible location of his meeting with God, he has no idea what to expect. It seems that God could take on any characteristics, even the evil of a demonic face. For Mack in this moment, God could just as easily be evil as good.



Confronted with evidence of Missy's murder, Mack attributes the violence of the tragedy to God himself, blaming God for Missy's death. God seems to have directly caused, or at least allowed, the tragedy of Missy's death. Mack also believes that God was not only capable of abandoning him, but did so in his time of greatest need, for reasons that Mack cannot understand



Feeling that God has abandoned him, Mack's grief descends to protect him from the raw emotions of confronting Missy's death. But in some way, Mack is still sustained by his relationships to his family members, using those bonds as motivation to keep living in the face of great tragedy.



As the world around him miraculously changes, Mack feels a surprising combination of feelings. The many and varied flowers blooming around Mack mirror the tangle of emotions he feels.



Mack's response to the welling up of unexpected emotions is to try to suppress those feelings. His instinct, in other words, is to try to avoid strong emotions because they can be painful or hard to control. Mack does not immediately associate the African American woman with God because she looks and behaves so differently from his preconceived image of God, who is cold, aloof, white, and male.



Suddenly, a small Asian woman emerges and sweeps Mack's tears into a small glass bottle. She gives him a sense of overwhelming warmth, but he finds it difficult to look at her directly, almost as if she is slightly transparent. She is dressed in gardening clothes. Behind her is a man in his thirties in work clothes who appears Middle Eastern. Mack finds his smile captivating.

Mack finds himself confused but also enchanted by the three strangers. The first introduces herself as Elousia, but she also says it might make sense to call her "Papa," like Nan does. The man introduces himself, saying he enjoys working and fixing things. He has many names but goes by Jesus to many. The second woman introduces herself as Sarayu, keeper of the **gardens**. Mack is confused by the three people, who do not match his expectations of God—but then, he also wonders what those expectations are founded on. When he asks which one of them is God, they all say, "I am," in unison. It makes a strange kind of sense to Mack.

Unlike Mack, the woman who collects Mack's tears clearly values painful emotions and the catharsis they bring with them. Mack, who is himself reserved, is surprised by the warmth and openness with which these strangers greet him.



CHAPTER 6: A PIECE OF [PI]

Elousia turns to go inside, telling Mack he can follow or do whatever else he likes. Mack stays outside with Jesus for a moment and asks if he's supposed to go inside and talk with God, but Jesus says he isn't supposed to do anything—rather, he should talk to her only if he wants to. After thinking about it, Mack decides that he does want to go inside.

The inside of the shack is just as transformed as the outside. The blood stain by the fireplace is gone, and everything is decorated with children's artwork. Mack finds Papa in the kitchen dancing to funk music. Mack expresses surprise that she isn't listening to something more religious, but she says that she listens to all music, and the hearts behind it, because all musicians are her children.

Mack is startled by the many challenges to his view of God that he has already experienced. He was not expecting three warm strangers to take a personal interest in him; but rather a single, inaccessible lord meting out justice from a distance. Yet the fact that Mack has preconceived notions of God shaped by his religious upbringing rather than his own ideas also suggests that his relationship to God is more defined by the bureaucracy of the church than his own personal feelings toward or relationship with God.



Throughout the course of the weekend, the three incarnations of God will make it clear that Mack is free to do as he chooses. This is both because free will in general is essential to humanity, but also because any conversation or relationship must be entered into freely and by choice in order to be meaningful.



Mack's relationship with God is filtered through the lens of the church, so he expects Papa to be surrounded by the trappings of religious institutions, but such institutions, *The Shack* argues, are artificial human creations. Mack has many assumptions about God, including his assumption that God usually works from a motive of vengeance, rather than love. Papa's statement about musicians suggests otherwise, showing that she takes a personal interest in all humans and operates from a perspective of love.



Mack says he's having a hard time wrapping his head around calling the woman Papa, and she suggests it's because he's never really had a papa of his own—but she could fulfill that roll. Mack breaks, asking how he can trust her to take care of him if she couldn't take care of Missy. She begins to cry, saying she is especially fond of Missy, and wants to fix the gulf between herself and Mack. She says it will take time.

Mack returns to his first point, saying it's hard to call her Papa because she appears as a woman. But, she says that it's important for her to appear this way to challenge his assumption of God as a white man. She says she is trying to prevent him from falling back on his religious conditioning. He realizes that she is helping him to get past his resistance to God by challenging his assumptions.

Papa says she knew Mack would come to the shack, and Mack asks if that means he had no choice in the matter. She points out that there are many inhibitors to freedom, from genetics and social conventions to advertising and mental habits. She says eventually, Mack will start to understand what freedom actually is—it's all about the man out in the woodshed, Jesus.

As she speaks, Mack sees that Papa has scars on her wrists, outlining pierce wounds. She says that what Jesus chose to do cost them dearly, but that they were together during Jesus's time on the cross. Mack is confused, saying he thought that God had abandoned Jesus while he was on the cross, just like God abandoned Mack. But Papa says she never left either of them.

Papa opens the window and begins feeding a bluejay. She uses the bird as analogy, saying that the bird is created to fly, and being grounded is just a limitation within that ability. She says the same is true of Mack living unloved—it is just a limitation within his ability to be loved. Pain has metaphorically clipped his wings and prevented him from feeling loved by God.

Mack is confused about how this kind person who seems to care from him—so different from the distant, vengeful God he imagined—could nonetheless have abandoned a little girl in her time of need. Through his questions, he is trying to reconcile his ideas about the nature of God with the unexpected reality before him. He is also, in this moment, unwittingly passing judgment on God by assuming what Papa's actions were and questioning their motivations,



Pap has assumed a physical form very different from what Mack imagined to prepare him for the parallel fact that many aspects of Her nature and personality are also quite different from what he had assumed. In this way, Papa attempts to combat some of the negative ideas that Mack holds about God. At the same time, these assumptions are informed by the fact that Mack's relationship to God is confined by what he has learned in scripture and church.



Papa is all-knowing, so she knows what humans will choose to do, but she maintains that it is important for humans to have the option to exercise free will and choose to do what they think is best.



One of the core beliefs that Mack holds about God before going to the shack is that God abandons humans, sometimes when they need him most—like when Jesus was on the cross or when Missy was kidnapped. But Papa maintains that that isn't the case, as exemplified by the fact that both she and Jesus have scars from Jesus' time on the cross. In other words: she was always with Jesus, and suffered with him. The scars challenge Mack's belief that God sometimes abandons people in their suffering.



Over the course of the weekend, God repeatedly emphasizes the importance of love as the basis for all relationships—even and especially the relationship between God and humans. Papa also points out that Mack's suppression of emotion in the wake of his daughter's death has prevented him from feeling god's love. He has protected himself by limiting himself.



Papa says that becoming Jesus was a way to embrace the limitations of being human, even as Papa herself still retained her unlimited abilities and existence. Jesus is both fully God and fully human. When Mack asks if flight and miracles performed by Jesus are evidence that Jesus was more than human, Papa disagrees. She says that those miracles are just evidence that Jesus's relationship with God was perfect.

Mack says that he's confused and asks again why there are three people in the cabin who seem to comprise a single God. Papa says that the three are necessary so that "love and relationship" can exist within God. In this way, God can contain love. Feeling slightly overwhelmed, Mack goes to wash up.

Papa explains more about the nature of God and the trinity by describing Jesus as a fully human embodiment of God. This view of the nature of God suggests that God was present in Jesus, so God could not have abandoned Jesus on the cross.



Papa explains that the importance of the trinity is that it contains love, meaning that love is at the heart of the relationship between humans and God. This is a revelation both in the sense that God acts from a place of love for humans, and in further explaining the trinity nature of God, both of which are different from what Mack previously envisioned about God.



CHAPTER 7: GOD ON THE DOCK

Mack is called back to the kitchen by a loud crashing sound. Jesus has dropped a large bowl of sauce and it has splattered Papa's feet and the hem of her skirt. But instead of fighting, Papa, Jesus, and Sarayu are all laughing uproariously. Jesus begins to clean Papa's feet. Mack observes that the love between the three of them is clearly the most important part of their relationship, and keeps them from arguing. He notices the contrast to how he sometimes treats those he loves.

The three and Mack sit down to a delicious dinner. Mack starts to say grace, but then awkwardly looks up and thanks his dinner companions directly. They ask Mack in detail about his family, listening in rapt attention. He asks why they are so interested if they are already all-knowing, and therefore already know all about his family members. Sarayu explains that sometimes people limit themselves in order to facilitate a relationship. The three have limited their awareness of Mack's family out of respect for him, so that they can listen to him talk about his family as if it's their first time learning about them. Sarayu says that one way to keep power out of relationships is by limiting ourselves or being especially careful or gentle. Examples of this abound: people use extra care when taking care of the infirm, relating to the poor, or speaking to those whose minds have wandered.

As Papa promised, the three elements of the trinity are able to demonstrate an example of perfect love and a perfect relationship. Mack observes that forgiveness is a powerful force in this dynamic, keeping animosity or vengeance from infecting a relationship built on love. Mack also sees that he would do well to try to emulate the love of God in his own relationships with other people, especially when he feels himself getting short tempered.



Over their time in the shack, the incarnations of God strive to help Mack understand the components of healthy relationships, and how they differ from all-too-common unhealthy ones. One example of this is holding back knowledge or power in order to use care with those at some kind of a disadvantage. Many relationships, The Shack argues, are infected by power imbalances. But in a relationship truly founded on love, the person with more power or knowledge won't hesitate to accommodate the other person, as Sarayu explains at the meal.



Papa says she would like to have a time of devotion after the meal. The suggestion startles Mack because it makes him think of formulaic bible recitations from his childhood. Instead, he watches as Jesus gently takes Papa's hands and says sincerely that he loved watching Papa try to take on Mack's pain and meet him halfway. Jesus says he loves being Papa's son. The devotion feels warm, intimate, and holy to Mack. He closes his eyes for a moment. Then, he goes to help Sarayu and Jesus wash and dry dishes in the kitchen.

Jesus invites Mack outside to look at the stars. They lie down under the brilliant night sky. Mack says he finds it easier to relate to Jesus than the other two, and Jesus says that because he is in human form, they have much in common. Jesus says that he offers a good way to relate to Papa and Sarayu, since he reflects them but is also human. He explains that Sarayu is the Holy Spirit, while Papa is the Creator God and the ground of all being.

Mack admits that he thought Jesus would be better-looking. Jesus says he is Jewish and asks what standards Mack is using to judge attractiveness. Besides, he says that being transcends appearance. Jesus says his purpose always has been to live within humans, and vice versa. Humans can become fully immersed in spiritual life through Jesus. Mack says he'll need some more time to think about all of that. Jesus makes a joke about Mack finding him ugly, and the two begin laughing hard. Jesus gives Mack a hug, and Mack feels momentarily wonderful before remembering his guilt about Missy and *The Great Sadness* threatens to return. Jesus assures him that he is not lost, then brings him inside to sleep.

CHAPTER 8: A BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

That night, Mack has a flying dream for the first time in years, since *The Great Sadness* overtook him. Mack finds himself peacefully exploring the beauty of creation until he is suddenly dragged down in the mud and sees Missy screaming for help. He awakes with a gasp. As the images fade, the feelings from the dream linger, leaving him mired in sadness and anger as he gets ready. He wonders why God wouldn't take his nightmares away, especially while they're sharing a cabin.

Mack has grown accustomed to filtering his affection for God through the conduit of official religion. But *The Shack* argues that while the church and scripture provide an avenue for connecting with God, they can also obscure the intense and personal love at the heart of every believer's relationship with God. Watching the devotion, Mack realizes that his devotion to God should be based on personal feelings and intimate trust rather than adherence to ritual.



Jesus may be easier for Mack to relate to because he also most closely reflects the vision of "the son" that Mack carried before the weekend, a version that was built and bolstered by Mack's upbringing in the church.



Once again, Mack notes that the physical appearance of the trinity contrasts with his preconceived notions, a parallel to the ways that their deeper nature is also different. Jesus also begins to point out that the standards Mack uses for evaluating others are judgmental and arbitrary, including his judgment of beauty and appearance. Just as Mack is beginning to feel good about the weekend his grief returns and he rapidly suppresses his burgeoning happiness. Mack's grief is a defense mechanism that keeps him from feeling anything, including positive emotion, too strongly.



Mack's depression has not only kept him from enjoying life to the fullest in his waking life, but even suppressed dreams he used to enjoy. When Mack has a nightmare, he wishes simply that he could stop dreaming, failing to see that even nightmares can have value in helping to process emotions. For Mack, it would be far easier to continue feeling nothing. Mack's desire that God take away his nightmares reflects both his avoidance of negative emotions and his belief that God can lift suffering at will, but chooses not to because he doesn't care.



Mack is drawn to the kitchen by the smell of breakfast and the sound of Papa singing to Bruce Cockburn. She tells Mack she is especially fond of Bruce, but she also agrees when he points out that she seems to be “especially fond” of all of her children. He asks if she ever gets mad at her children, and she says that she certainly does—but even that anger is just an expression of her love. She still loves children that she’s angry at. Feeling his own anger rise, Mack asks how that forgiveness fits in with the image of a vengeful, angry God, killing people as in Biblical stories. He asks if she enjoys punishing and killing. She says sadly that she doesn’t need or want to punish people for sin, and she doesn’t need to fit any preconceived notion of an angry God.

Jesus and Sarayu join them for breakfast, and Jesus, Sarayu, and Papa, enter into an intense conversation about reconciling an estranged family while Mack listens with awe. He finds the way the listen and react to each other to be beautiful. He asks which one of them is in charge, and Sarayu explains that there is no hierarchy among them, only love. She says that authority and hierarchy are human concepts that lead only to the infliction of power and abuse into relationships, which is not what God intended. The constant weighing of individuals against systems leads only to prejudice, war, and abuse of relationships.

They ask Mack to step outside that mindset of hierarchy in order to trust God. Mack asks how he can possibly do that given all the pain and destruction in the world, including the death of Missy. Papa says there are many reasons to allow pain and suffering, and those ends make everything worth it. Mack says he can’t understand how anything could justify the loss of so many lives, to which Papa responds that he still has much to learn. Ultimately, the problem is that Mack does not believe that Papa is good. If he did, he would trust Papa despite the difficulty and pain of life. In order for any of that to happen, Mack must learn to trust that Papa loves him. Sarayu invites Mack out to the garden to continue their conversation.

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

Mack follows Sarayu into a beautiful, seemingly disordered **garden**. She says that the garden follows a complicated pattern of fractals, but from the ground looks like a colorful mess. Sarayu asks Mack to help her clear a patch of flowers and he agrees. He asks why she would create “bad” things like weeds and mosquitoes, and she answers that humans, having chosen the path of independence, are blind to the ways that everything in creation works together. She acknowledges that there are poisonous plants in the **garden**, but notes that humans assume that poison is bad and serves no purpose.

Mack confronts Papa about the ways in which she doesn’t conform to his ideas about the nature of God, and the frustrations that have arisen because of that disconnect. Mack explains point blank that he thinks God is angry and vengeful, but Papa disagrees. She explains that the relationship between God and people is predicated on love, and, like all relationships predicated on love, it should be as free from harmful power dynamics as possible.



Jesus, Sartayu, and Papa value loving and peaceful relationships very highly, as exemplified by their desire to help a family in conflict. They also have a very specific definition of what love is and how it should operate; a definition that is often corrupted by humans who inject power dynamics and hierarchies into relationships. Instead of allowing these structures to taint relationships, Sarayu encourages Mack to reject hierarchies. Such structures, she argues, inevitably reduce people to their productive value, which leads to prejudice and fighting.



One reason that Mack suffers so much is that he assumes God causes all the pain in the world, and he judges God for causing that pain. But the book suggests that this viewpoint is in fact an unfortunate side effect of Mack’s independence from God: he no longer trusts God and does not believe that the basis of God’s relationship with humans is love. Mack’s judgment, combined with his fundamental misunderstanding of God’s nature, means that he actually perceives God as a force of evil in the world.



Just as Mack assumes that his negative emotions are only painful but serve no purpose, Mack sees weeds and poisonous plants as unmitigatedly bad. But Sarayu explains that this kind of outlook is tantamount to placing Mack’s own judgment and assessment of good and evil above the assessments of God. If Mack trusted that all of creation worked together according to God’s plan, he would know that all plants have a purpose. This viewpoint, Sarayu states, is a side effect of the larger movement of humans away from God.



As they clear the roots from the patch of ground, Mack asks if there really was a **Garden** of Eden, and Sarayu says there was. Mack says that will displease some people, but Sarayu does not mind.

The three-part God that Mack encounters blend more conventional elements of the traditional trinity with unexpected twists. One element of their story that apparently adheres to Christian teaching is the literal existence of Eden.



Sarayu returns to the issue of good and evil, asking Mack how he discerns between right and wrong. Reflecting, he says that he believes things that feel good or provide him a sense of security seem to be right, while things that threaten that sense seem to be wrong. He admits it's pretty subjective and oriented around his own experiences. Sarayu warns that such an outlook means humans become the judge of what is good and evil, and, when they disagree, it can lead to fighting and wars. Mack agrees this is a problem. Sarayu says humans need to trust in God instead of making their own list of what is right and wrong. In reality, there is no such thing as darkness or evil; only Light and Good and their absence. Departing from God is turning towards evil because it means making a list of what is good and bad rather than trusting God.

Mack is inspired, but also says it will be difficult to accept that certain things—like cancer or murder or loss of income—may be good. Sarayu says that children like Missy do not have a right to be protected, rather they are simply loved. Rights do not actually exist and are just human constructs, bound to cause frustration. In reality, there are only relationships built on trust and love.

By asking Mack to examine his own way of thinking about good and evil in the world, Sarayu helps him see that truths he holds dear may in fact be subjective and therefore prone to fault. She explains that making such judgments are one way of asserting independence from God, because rather than trusting all to God's judgment, many people, including Mack, try to impose their own judgments on the world. Independence from God leads to suffering in that it forces people to judge one another and declare some people good and others bad, a task that should be left to God alone.



Just then, Papa approaches and compliments their work. Sarayu says that the **garden** itself is actually Mack's soul, beautiful, wild, and still in process. He is overwhelmed with emotion. Handing Mack a picnic lunch, Papa says that Jesus wants to see him.

Furthermore, Sarayu explains, the concept of "rights," which Mack uses to help him judge right and wrong, is just an artificial human construct used to justify judgment and violence. If humans realized they were loved by God and extended similar love to others, rather than expecting a right to protection from harm, they would be much happier.



Sarayu's garden, which appears to Mack as a jumble of good and bad, is actually a complicated pattern of components working together in concert. In much the same way, Mack's emotions, good and bad, are necessary pieces of who he is.



CHAPTER 10: WADE IN THE WATER

Jesus takes Mack over to the lake and walks to the end of the dock, bidding Mack to follow. When Mack realizes Jesus is inviting him to walk across the surface of the lake together, he is taken aback and momentarily afraid to continue. Jesus says that without wisdom, Mack is simply allowing his imagination to paint a picture of the worst-case scenario. He asks whether Mack's mind tends to dwell in the past, present, or future. Mack responds that while he thinks humans should live in the present, he himself spends a lot of time thinking about the past, and even more worrying about the future. Jesus points out that when Mack imagines the future, he does not think about God at all, and instead plays God himself by imagining his fears and trying to figure out how to avoid his own perception of evil. These fears keep him from knowing that God is good.

With Jesus's encouragement, Mack steps off the dock, and the two walk easily across the surface of the lake. Mack is delighted. On the other shore is a beautiful **waterfall** and meadow. Jesus says the earth would be even more beautiful if it weren't for war or for the fact that humans plunder natural resources for their own needs.

As they eat their lunch, Mack asks why Jesus wouldn't take back the earth if humans are destroying it. But Jesus says again that God does not operate on a hierarchy, and to take back the earth would be to force God's will on humans. Instead, all three incarnations of God submit to one another and to humans, because submission is the true fabric of relationships. It is not about authority, but love and respect.

Jesus says that ideally, all relationships should be founded this way. Instead, when humans struck out on their own in Eden, most men turned towards the work of their hands for fulfilment, while most women turned towards the relationships for fulfilment. God created men and women to face each other as equals, but instead the fact that women turned to men for work and protection led men to have power over women. Preserving this hierarchy is unhealthy. Jesus tells Mack to head off on a path by the **waterfall**, where someone is waiting for him.

When Mack tries to judge situations for himself, rather than trusting to God, he can only use his imperfect perception and his imagination to assess the world around him. Such assessments are necessarily flawed, leading Mack to be fearful of worst-case-scenario outcomes. This, *The Shack* claims, is one of many negative side effects of straying from God. Trying to predict the future for himself only leads Mack to worry, because he cannot accept that God has a greater plan.



Jesus vividly illustrates that by trusting God, Mack can avoid his worst fears for the future, and instead benefit from God's love. Jesus's references to war and the exploitation of natural resources point to larger-scale negative outcomes of straying from God and focusing too much on personal struggles.



Mack's conversation with Jesus reinforces the trinity's assertion that hierarchies infect relationships with unhealthy power dynamics. Not only is that true for the relationship between the three components of God, but also for the relationship between God and humans. In order for the relationship between God and humans to be true, it must come freely and without an undue power imbalance. This structure of the God/human relationship also explains why God "lets" bad things happen. Because humans must be able to choose.



Jesus here explains some of the ways in which relationships on Earth have become tainted and corrupted by power dynamics. Whether this particular explanation is believable – that men turned toward work and women toward relationships to find fulfillment – might be up for some debate, but the larger point is that any such hierarchies have led to unhealthy relationships between the sexes.



CHAPTER 11: HERE COME DA JUDGE

Mack comes to a rock face, but finds that, miraculously, he is able to walk through the wall. He finds himself in a tunnel leading to a large, dark cavern illuminated only with a faint light that seems to be emanating from Mack himself. In the center of the cavern is a chair. Mack takes a seat and sees in front of him a regal olive-skinned woman standing behind a huge ebony desk. Mack is overwhelmed by her beauty. She asks if Mack understands why he is there, and although he does not, he finds himself entranced just by the sound of her voice.

The olive-skinned woman says she is there to help Mack on this serious day and that Mack is there because of his children, which confuses him. She says Mack has done a commendable job of loving his children, despite the fact that not all parents are able to care for their children well—Mack’s own father, she points out, did not love him well. Then, she asks him which of his children he loves the most. He smiles, saying that he loves them all in unique ways. Each of his children seemed to bring with them the capacity for him to give more love. He likens it to how Papa is “especially fond” of each of her children. The woman smiles, saying Mack is wise to realize that love expands to contain the knowing of each child.

When the olive-skinned woman says that Mack loves his children the way the Father loves his, Mack bristles, saying that if Missy is one of God’s children, God doesn’t love his children very well. The woman grows serious and tells Mack that he is there for judgment—not for him to be judged, but for him to judge others. Mack says he has no ability to judge, but she points out that he judges the actions and motivations of others, judges based on appearance and history, and more. Such judgment makes him feel superior to others. Mack knows his judgments have been superficial, designed simply to make him feel safe or reinforce his beliefs. She tells Mack to take her seat behind the large desk, and he does, reluctantly.

The olive-skinned woman tells Mack he is there to judge God and the human race. She says he must feel that many people need judgment, like the greedy or those who beat their wives or children, or the man who killed Missy.

Because of what he has already experienced over the course of the weekend, Mack accepts that interacting with God seems to require him to trust various strangers who appear as personas of God and to try to relax in unfamiliar situations. He is more trusting now than when he first arrived at the cabin, as exemplified by his comfort with the unfamiliar olive-skinned woman.



Mack’s affection for his children helps him to recognize wider truths about love generally, and the love that God has for humans: rather than being predicated on specific actions or attributes, Mack’s love for his children, simply, is, and is based on knowing them as they are. In this way, there is not a sense of hierarchy or power between either Mack and his children, or between his love for each of them. God’s love for humans works in the same way.



However, Mack is uncomfortable with the parallel that the woman draws between God’s love, and Mack’s love for his own children. Mack’s perception of God still hinges on the expectation that God can mete out or withhold harm, which does not seem compatible with love. In response, the woman points out that Mack has taken on one of God’s central roles by constantly judging those around him.



By listing examples of those Mack would surely see as guilty, the olive-skinned woman points out that Mack has already taken on the role of judge even though he claims to be unqualified. Even deeming those who seem most guilty as evil, people like Mack are still taking on God’s role, and, by extension, are judging God and all humans.



At that, Mack's anger breaks through, and he says Missy's killer should be damned to hell. The olive-skinned woman asks about that man's father, who raised a monster; Mack agrees that he should be damned, as well. The woman says that by that logic it is then necessary to follow a legacy of brokenness going all the way back to Adam and then God. She says that this is what fuels *The Great Sadness*—Mack's distrust of God. Mack says that yes, God is to blame for allowing a twisted soul to take Missy when he could have stopped it.

The olive-skinned woman tells Mack that if he thinks he has the ability to judge God, he certainly has the ability to judge all of humanity. She says he must choose only two of his children to join God in heaven, while the rest will go to hell. Panicking, Mack says he doesn't want to be the judge. He refuses to choose, even when the woman says he must. Crying and begging, he pleads to be taken to hell in the place of his children. Smiling, she says he sounds like Jesus and she is proud of him. She says that he has judged his children worthy of love, even at cost to himself, and now he knows Papa's heart.

Relieved, Mack sits back in the chair. But Mack says he still doesn't understand how Papa could love Missy and let her murder happen. The olive-skinned woman says that the world is severely broken because humans demanded independence. Horrible things happen to those Papa loves because of this. Missy dying was not part of Papa's plan. The woman says the way out of this pain is to give up independence, stop trying to be the judge, and instead know and embrace Papa. Mack says he wants to stop being a judge and trust Papa, but he still needs time.

Suddenly, Mack hears children's laughter. One wall of the cavern becomes transparent, though still impassable. Through it, he sees his children playing near where a stream flows into the lake—all of his children, including Missy. Missy runs over to the rock face. The olive-skinned woman says Missy knows Mack is there, but cannot see or hear him, even though he calls out to her. Mack tries to memorize every detail of her face and hair. She mouths and signs, "I love you." The woman tells Mack this is a glimpse into the beautiful afterlife. The other children will experience this moment as a dream.

By taking Mack's judgment of Missy's killer to its logical extreme, the olive-skinned woman demonstrates that judgments of other people are, in actuality, judgments of God. In this way, condemning others is a way of breaking away from God and claiming to have superior knowledge and power. This practice has disastrous large-scale consequences, but the woman also points out that on a personal level, taking on God's responsibilities has led Mack to live in a state of constant fear and depression.



Again, the olive-skinned woman points out the slippery slope of judgment: if Mack thinks he is fit to deem one person evil, he is tacitly judging God and all of creation—including his own children. However, the unique and strong love that Mack feels for his children, as he described earlier, keeps him from singling out any of them for retribution, in much the same way that God loves all humans equally simply by knowing them.



The olive-skinned woman has shown Mack that attempting to judge others is one way of asserting dangerous independence from God. But now she also explains another horrible side effect of humans straying from God: tragedies like Missy's death, rather than being willed by God as punishment, are simply the act of reckless humans choosing to stray from God's design. The idea that evil exists not because God is vengeful but because humans choose to do wrong is a huge shift in both how Mack views God's will and how he thinks about the source of suffering.



Even though he has struggled to build a strong relationship with God, Mack's love for his children—and their love for each other and him—serves as a strong foundation for their family. Mack draws strength from these bonds, an attribute he has clearly passed on to his children.



Mack says he still feels like it's his fault that Missy was taken, but the olive-skinned woman says that no one else believes that, and even if they did, he would be forgiven. Someone calls Missy's name, and she mimes giving Mack a final hug and kiss. He sees Jesus give Missy a hug as a **waterfall** crashes down in front of him, obscuring his view. The cave has become a grotto behind the waterfall. Mack says he feels less stuck. The woman points him towards the grotto entrance, and he sees Jesus waiting for him by the shore. As he heads in that direction, Mack focuses on his memory of Missy, and misses Nan very much.

Mack begins to face some of the difficult emotions at the heart of his grief: part of his depression derives from the fact that he sees himself as responsible for Missy's death. Hearing that he would be forgiven even if the death was his fault allows him to start processing his grief, rather than keeping it locked away, demonstrating the power of talking about grief as well as the importance of forgiveness. Leaving the cave, Mack realizes how much he is sustained by the relationships and love in his life, from the memory of the love he had for his daughter, to his strong bond with Nan.



CHAPTER 12: IN THE BELLY OF THE BEASTS

As Mack makes his way to the lake, he realizes that *The Great Sadness* is no longer a part of him—after all, Missy would not want it to be. He meets up with Jesus, who is skipping stones. Jesus explains that the woman in the cave was Sophia, a personification of Papa's wisdom. She is not a separate persona of God but a part of Sarayu's mystery. Mack and Jesus talk about whether any of the conversations at the cabin and the lake are "real," or simply taking place in dreams. Jesus assures Mack that either way, the truths he's learning are extremely real.

Mack says he can't stop thinking about Missy alone and terrified in the truck. Jesus stops him and says Missy was never alone—he, Sarayu, and Papa were with her the whole time. Jesus says he and Missy talked during that time, and Missy was calm, worrying only about how her father would feel. Mack feels himself begin to sob, but he doesn't feel alone. He feels a sense of relief.

Beginning to talk about the source of his grief has already helped Mack to move on, because he can examine the underlying logic behind his emotions. Realizing that his daughter would not want him to hold onto his pain helps him begin to move on. As Jesus points out, these emotional revelations will have a real and lasting impact even if the circumstances under which they come about are fantastical.



Mack begins to walk into the lake without hesitation, trusting that he will be able to walk on the water as before. Instead, he is surprised to see the water well up around his calves like usual. But unlike before he knows Jesus is there, so he doesn't have to worry. Sure enough, Jesus soon joins him, and, with Jesus by his side, Mack rises up out of the water and is able to walk on the surface. Jesus says Mack has been keeping dark fears inside him for a long time, because it feels safer. But, as Mack learns to accept the love of God, they will join him on his life's journey and help him to be less alone. Jesus says he, Sarayu, and Papa have been trying to show Mack the truth about Missy for a long time, but he wasn't ready to receive it.

Jesus helps confront a lingering misconception that Mack holds about God: Mack believes that God sometimes abandons people in times of need, and that he abandoned Missy when she was kidnapped. But Jesus corrects this misperception, telling Mack that all three incarnations of God helped Missy during her kidnapping. God is not cold and removed from humans during times of tragedy, but a source of comfort. While God cannot intervene—because doing so would limit humanity's option to choose—God never abandons.



Just over the course of the afternoon, Mack has already learned to be more trusting of God. Before, he tried to imagine what would happen if he plunged into the lake, or get angry at God for not allowing him to walk on water. But now, he trusts that God will care for him, showing that Mack is choosing to be less independent from God. Turning towards God in this way will not only allow Mack to be less afraid of the future, but also ready him to accept important truths, like the fact that Missy was never abandoned by God.



When they reach the dock on the opposite shore, Mack asks if he was seeing Missy in heaven, even though it didn't resemble the pearly gates and gold-plated heaven he had envisioned. Jesus says that that image of heaven is derived from an image of Jesus's bride, the church. Mack says the image of the church as a beautiful community of individuals forming a spiritual city does not align with his experience of church, and Jesus agrees that Mack is referring only to the institution of church, not the community of people who symbolize the church for Jesus.

Mack has never felt close to God before this weekend, even though he was brought up in the church. One reason for this is that the church serves to mediate the relationship between people and God, which can create distance rather than bringing them together. The church as people like Mack know it is an imperfect human creation that does not reflect the ideal relationship between people and God. But Jesus defines the church not as an institution or rules and rituals, but as a community of believers. Jesus's description makes church a web of relationships of love.



Jesus says that the way to become part of the church is by embracing relationships and sharing life. Instead, people have formed bureaucratic institutions that have nothing to do with Jesus and are even contrary to his purpose. The creation of institutions, like marriage, politics, economics, and religion, are simply the works of humans playing God, and don't represent Jesus's actual intentions. These systems provide a false sense of security.

Jesus further explains the ways in which the relationship between God and people is tainted by the institution of the church. The church as an institution infects these relationships with hierarchies and power, which are antithetical to loving, open relationships. Ideally, people should strive for a loving relationship with God instead of becoming distracted by the bureaucracy of the church.



Mack feels much of the conversation going over his head, but he wants to try to understand. Jesus explains that in order to live a full life of friendship and openness, humans need to embrace Jesus—otherwise, it would be like trying to walk on water without him. As they stand up from the dock, Jesus tells Mack that even though many institutions and systems of power created by humans are inescapable, he can help Mack find freedom from them by opening himself up to love. Mack can be in the world but not of it. Jesus heads back to his workshop, with a final word to Mack, telling him that letting Mack see Missy earlier was Papa's idea. Mack goes into the shack to try to find her.

Jesus returns to the idea that it is necessary to try to establish a close personal relationship with God, founded on trust rather than the rituals of the church. By making this personal choice to have a loving relationship with God, humans can circumvent the corrupting influence of power dynamics and institutions, even though those hierarchies are everywhere and impossible to completely escape.



CHAPTER 13: A MEETING OF HEARTS

Mack joins Papa on the porch and begins to enjoy some fresh-baked scones she's made. Papa says they are from Mack's great-great-great grandmother's recipe. As he eats the scones, Mack apologizes for being so hard on Papa in the past. He thanks Papa for letting him see Missy, recalling the thought of his princess behind the **waterfall**. Reminded of the Multnomah legend, Mack asks if Missy had to die so Papa could change him. Papa is adamant: she says that just because she is able to create good out of tragedy doesn't mean she orchestrates tragedies. She says that just because she used pain for good doesn't mean that she caused the pain. Mack is relieved to hear this.

Mack still has lingering doubts about how Papa works, brought to the surface when he connects the waterfall with the story of the Multnomah princess who sacrificed herself at the behest of the Great Spirit. Earlier, Mack felt that God allowed bad things to happen. Here he returns to a similar but slightly different idea: that God allows bad things to happen in order to create positive good elsewhere. But Papa reminds him that tragedies are the product of humans straying from God, not something that God causes. And that God then tries to create good out of negative situations. Despite all he has seen, Mack's ideas about the nature of God are persistent.



Mack says he feels lighter with the knowledge that Missy didn't die for his sake, as well as realizing that he had been judging God but has the capacity to stop. Still, he doesn't understand why Papa chose to help him. He feels guilty that he has had such difficulty accepting Papa. Papa says that, like many, he hides inside lies to avoid getting hurt.

Mack says that he lied to Nan about coming to the shack because he didn't want to hurt her, but Papa says that is just a justification. Papa says he was really just scared of having to deal with the emotions he would have encountered if he had told Nan the truth. If he hadn't lied, Nan could be there with them now. Papa says the only solution is to tell her and ask for forgiveness.

Papa explains that the evil in the world is not caused by her to gain people's love. Instead, evil flows from independence, which is a choice that people make for themselves. In order for people to truly, freely love Papa, she must allow them the choice to commit evil. Papa says that the chaos of the world has purpose that must be allowed to unfold, even though it puts those she loves into horrible tragedies.

Realizing she's referring to Jesus, Mack asks what Jesus accomplished by dying. Papa says that Jesus's death and resurrection allowed Papa to become fully reconciled with the world. Feeling both his mind and stomach are full, Mack helps Papa clear the dishes.

CHAPTER 14: VERBS AND OTHER FREEDOMS

Mack decides to take a canoe out on the lake. Feeling better than he has in a long time, Mack feels free to sing, look at the beautiful scene around him, and even to cry as he thinks about the troubles of his daughter, Katie. Suddenly, he sees that Sarayu is sitting in the canoe with him. She says that dinner is soon and it's time to return to the cabin. Sarayu reminds Mack that she's always with him. Even when he returns home, he will be able to sense her thoughts in his.

Sophia's lessons have begun to impact Mack: he realizes that his ideas about God are actually judgments that make him feel more removed from God, and that he can choose to stop making such judgments.



Papa gets to the heart of another issue that has been causing Mack pain without him realizing it: because Mack doesn't like facing and contemplating difficult emotions, he avoids confronting his feelings and those of his loved ones. And, Papa further explains, he will justify and lie to himself and others in order to avoid those confrontations, which separates him from those others. Papa's suggested remedy is connection and honesty, which is manifested in revealing the truth and asking for forgiveness.



Once again, Papa reiterates the point that evil derives from humans' decision to stray from God. According to her, they are allowed to do so because their love for God must come freely rather than being coerced. Just as negative emotions and poisonous plants serve a difficult but necessary purpose in the wider tapestry of life, these evils also come to be part of the fabric of the world.



Papa explains another piece of the nature of God, which is that through Jesus' death and resurrection, God became irrevocably tied to humans. In this way, God, by God's own choice, cannot abandon humans as Mack imagines.



Because he has begun to confront and work through some of the emotions underlying The Great Sadness, Mack finds that he can enjoy things, like a beautiful day in nature, that were previously denied him because of his depression. Sarayu's sudden appearance and reassurance drives home the point that God can never abandon Mack, even if he feels alone.



Mack says that Papa has helped him realize he's afraid of emotions, something that concerns him. He says he is afraid of bad emotions. But Sarayu says that emotions are neither good nor bad, but provide the color of the soul, while *The Great Sadness* was a lack of emotion that made life seem flat and gray. Sarayu says that emotions are fed by perceptions, which in turn are shaped by paradigms or beliefs. In order to understand and trust his emotions, Mack must also interrogate his deepest beliefs.

Mack says that living in this way feels more complicated than simply following the rules in scripture. Laughing, Sarayu asks if those rules ever helped Mack in the past, and he admits that they mostly made him feel guilty. Sarayu says that relationships, not rules, are the only way to get at the deeper questions of life. Those who think they have all the answers simply because they know and follow scripture are likely fooling themselves.

Mack joins Sarayu, Jesus, and Papa at the table, where they openly talk and laugh with each other. He finds their warmth and friendship inspiring, and imagines trying to bring that demeanor to his own relationships. For a moment, overwhelmed by the reality of the situation, he closes his eyes, wondering if it's all a dream. But when he opens them, the three are still there, smiling at them.

Mack asks what the three of them expect of him now that they have given him the gift of such a lovely weekend. Unexpectedly, they freeze and seem upset.

Sarayu begins to explain that because of Jesus's death, humans are no longer bound by the Commandments, but they still behave as if they are. The enforcement of rules is just a way for humans to make themselves feel independent and in control, and, worse, to judge one another. Sarayu warns that expectations and responsibilities are simply other forms of rules, which remove freedom and create guilt and shame instead. Papa has no expectations for Mack, but simply knows him.

The three return to the idea of hierarchy, saying they don't want to be a first priority in Mack's life, but rather at the center of everything. As they begin clearing the table, Sarayu asks if she can touch Mack's eyes and heal them. She says she wants him to be able to see what they see, just temporarily. Her touch on his eyelids is unexpectedly cool and exhilarating.

Sarayu helps Mack to see that, like the mix of plants in the garden, the complicated mix of emotions he feels is an important part of being alive. Just as trusting God means that trusting even poisonous plants have a purpose, it also means trusting that emotions that Mack perceives as "negative" serve important functions and are necessary to living a full and varied life.



Sarayu's conversation serves as another reminder that the scripture can easily hinder the relationship people have with God, because it turns a relationship that should be founded on love into one shaped by human-designed rules and rituals.



Seeing the warmth and openness between the three incarnations of God makes Mack feel inspired to reorient his own relationships around love and forgiveness. This also exemplifies Papa's earlier statement that the trinity exists to that God can contain and embody love and relationship.



Mack has begun to understand that relationships should be founded on love and understanding, but his question suggests that he still thinks he owes God something in return for God's love.



Many human relationships are corrupted by the presence of unnecessary rules and judgments and the power dynamics that they create. While humans think they are serving justice by creating laws and judging one another, they are actually taking the power of judgment from God. Just as human relationships are tainted by rules and expectations, *The Shack* suggests that Mack wrongly believes that God expects something of him.



Just as hierarchy doesn't exist in the relationships among the trinity, they do not want their relationship with Mack to be somewhere along a hierarchy, but instead rest at the center of his life.



CHAPTER 15: A FESTIVAL OF FRIENDS

When Mack opens his eyes, he is outside, perched on a small hill overlooking a clearing. The forest around him glimmers with celestial light. Each creature in the forest is clearly visible as a blazing point of color and light. Their movements leave trails of bright fire in the darkness. Mack feels no pain, only joy. Soon, a large group of children, alight with pale inner light, fill the meadow before him. A second circle of larger, colorful lights forms behind them; a group of adults. A last circle of even taller, blue flames forms behind them; Sarayu says they are angels.

One man in the middle circle seems to be having difficulty. The other lights are colorful but calm and subdued, but his light is unruly, flashing out spears of color. Sarayu explains that he is having difficulty controlling his feelings: the patterns of colorful light are a visualization of emotions, activated by relationships. Each relationship generates a unique pattern of color and light because each relationship is unique.

Sarayu says that the man having difficulty is Mack's father. Overwhelmed with a mix of emotions, Mack runs towards his father as the light emanating from both of them mingles. Both crying, Mack and his father embrace and exchange confession and forgiveness. A fountain of color from the children and adults around them illuminates the sky.

Still crying, Mack returns to Sarayu as Jesus emerges from the darkness, dressed in a white garment and gold crown. The crowd erupts in cheers. Jesus invites the assembled crowd to greet him, and they individually speak to him before making their way back to the forest. Mack is overwhelmed by the love of the scene. Finally, Mack, Sarayu, and Jesus turn back towards the cabin and walk towards it as Mack's vision returns to normal.

CHAPTER 16: A MORNING OF SORROWS

Mack is shaken awake just before dawn by a kindly looking man with a silver ponytail. He realizes it is Papa, who says that he thinks this morning Mack will need more of a father figure. Mack dresses in hiking clothes that Papa has left for him and heads to the kitchen.

The variety of colors that Mack sees here reflect the variety in Sarayu's garden, which in turn is a reflection of the varied emotions within each person. One lesson Mack has learned over the course of the weekend is that such variation is integral to all life.



Sarayu explains the connections between colors and emotions, reinforcing the wide variety of both positive and negative emotions that are present in human souls. Because each person is unique and each relationship is based on truly knowing another person, the nature of each relationship is that it, too, is unique.



When he forgives his father and asks for his forgiveness in return, Mack experiences a catharsis and an outpouring of support. Forgiveness can help people to confront long-buried feelings of pain and guilt and move on to healing.



Jesus takes the time to speak with each person individually, reflecting yet again the personal and individualized nature of the relationship that each person can have with God.



By shifting appearances to resemble a father, Papa demonstrates again that he uses changes in physical appearance to help Mack understand underlying attributes of God. In this case, he wants to demonstrate that God can be a fatherly presence, and more, broadly, that a relationship with God can offer what each person needs at different times.



Sarayu gives Mack a tightly rolled pack, filled with aromatic flowers and herbs that Mack and Sarayu picked the day before. Jesus says he will give Mack a gift when he returns. Papa makes Mack some breakfast, and he eats before following Papa outside. They grab a shovel and a pick.

Papa and Mack begin to walk down the trailhead. Then, Papa starts leading them on an unofficial path through the trees, marked occasionally by a red arc inscribed on a tree or stone. Mack thinks about how much he has healed after such a short time, and realizes he still has so many questions. One lingering question is how Papa could have allowed Missy to die. Papa explains that he could have averted Missy's death by never creating life in the first place, or by actively interfering in her circumstance. The first was never a consideration, while the second was not an option for reasons that are beyond Mack's understanding. He adds that while he didn't purposely cause Missy's death, he can use it for good. Mack says he still doesn't understand but now, he trusts Papa.

Papa and Mack arrive at a rocky shale clearing. Papa says that, before he shows Mack their destination, which will be painful, he wants to take away one more thing darkening Mack's heart. Knowing what Papa means, Mack begins to cry, asking how he can ever forgive Missy's killer. He wants justice, or at least revenge. But Papa says Mack must forgive the killer so that Papa can redeem him. In order to forgive, Mack doesn't need to forget what happened, or let go of his anger. But he will be able to let go of his own pain. Papa says Missy has already forgiven her killer because of Papa's presence in her. Weeping, Mack says out loud that he forgives the man. He feels lighter and more alive.

Mack goes to walk back to the cabin, but Papa says they still have more to do. He says they are going to bring Missy home. Mack begins to cry again, thanking Papa and apologizing for crying. Papa says not to discount the healing and joyful power of tears.

Papa and Mack follow the trail to a pile of rocks blocking off a cave. Together, they clear the rocks and crawl into the cave entrance, heavy with the scent of decay. They come to a small body covered in a decaying sheet. Mack realizes the purpose of Sarayu's gift, and unwraps the scented mat. Papa wraps Missy's body inside, and they exit the cave as Mack says "I forgive you" under his breath. Before they leave, Papa places a rock with the red arc marking by the mouth of the cave.

Sarayu, Jesus, and Papa all work together to prepare Mack for the difficult day ahead, demonstrating the way that the trinity can work together in concert since they are all components of God.



Mack still has difficulty understanding how God could allow tragedies to happen. His old perception of God as cold and uncaring has been mostly dispelled, but this confusion lingers. Papa explains again that evil derives from human independence even though God may eventually find purpose to derive from that evil. Although Mack doesn't fully understand, he has relinquished enough of his own independence to trust that Papa is right.



Mack has been able to shed most of the judgment he once carried, but he still harbors heavy resentment for Missy's killer. Not only is holding onto this judgment that is keeping him removed from God, but it is also a personal barrier to his healing, because it keeps his pain and grief unresolved and tied to retribution against the killer. Papa convinces Mack that forgiving the killer will help him to feel closer to God and begin healing his own pain. Note that such forgiveness does not free the killer from God's judgment, but rather frees Mack from trying to take on the role of God.



Mack is embarrassed by the intensity and inconvenience of strong emotions. But Papa, like Sarayu, reminds Mack that these emotions serve extremely vital purposes and should not be a source of shame.



Faced with the epicenter of his grief, Mack is both literally and figuratively armed with the tools to confront Missy's death. Just as Sarayu's gift helps him to carry her body, his newfound forgiveness for Missy's killer helps lessen the weight of judgment and pain that he associated with her death.



CHAPTER 17: CHOICES OF THE HEART

Jesus meets Papa and Mack when they arrive back at the cabin. He takes Mack into his work shed, where he shows him a beautifully wrought coffin. It is intricately carved with scenes from Missy's life, showing her with each of her family members and enjoying her favorite activities. Jesus says that Missy picked out the scenes herself. They carefully place Missy in the box and fill it with flowers from Sarayu's pack.

Sarayu leads them outside to the space in the **garden** that Mack helped her clear the day before. There is a hole there and they lower the coffin into it. Sarayu sings a song that Missy wrote for the occasion, about becoming one with the wind. She scatters a vial of Mack's tears on the earth, and where each one falls, flowers bloom instantly. A special tear causes a tree to bloom, and Sarayu says it is a tree of life growing in the garden of Mack's heart.

Inside the cabin, Papa leads them to the living room, where there is a glass of wine and a loaf of fresh bread. Papa says that Mack has a choice. He can either remain with them and continue to grow and learn, or he can return to his family and friends. If he stays, he will see Missy that afternoon. But, Papa says, Missy is in a place beyond impatience and will also not mind waiting for Mack. Mack says it's a tough choice and asks if anything he does at home even matters. Sarayu says that it all matters, because he is important. If Mack forgives or performs an act of kindness, it changes the whole universe for the better. Mack says that, in that case, he will go back.

Sarayu says she has one more gift for Mack. She tells him that Kate believes she is to blame for Missy's death. Suddenly, it all makes sense to Mack. He can't believe he didn't realize that was the source of Kate's grief sooner. He thanks Sarayu. Jesus also offers him a gift, the small tin box where Mack keeps his prized belongings. But Mack says he wants Jesus to keep it, because "All my best treasures are now hidden in you anyway. I want you to be my life." Jesus says that he is.

The scenes on Missy's coffin are another demonstration of the strong relationships in Mack's family. Just as he has unique love for each member of his family, so did Missy; and that love is memorialized in the special scenes on her coffin.



Sarayu uses the tears from her first meeting with Mack, demonstrating again that she believes even "negative" emotions hold special power and significance and are worthy of attention. The ceremony demonstrates that while it is of course appropriate for Mack to grieve for Missy, it is also possible for him to do so without experiencing guilt and depression, instead focusing on the love and beauty in her life.



Previously, Mack considered leaving his life in order to be reunited with Missy, because his grief and depression were so strong that life seemed pointless. But now, he feels life returning to its previous vibrancy. Furthermore, Sarayu explains that just as humans choose to move further from God by committing evil, Mack can personally help bring them closer to God by performing acts of kindness, which seems to him a worthy goal.



Just as Mack's depression was rooted in feelings of guilt about Missy's death, he now realizes that his daughter Kate was struggling with similar emotions and also needs to confront the underlying causes of her sadness in order to begin healing. Mack's statement to Jesus suggests that he has embraced the idea of a non-hierarchical relationship with God, in which God is at the center of who he is rather than a force commanding him from above.



Mack and the three enjoy the bread and wine and then Mack begins preparing to go home, knowing it is time to tell Nan everything. He changes into his old clothes. When he returns to the living room, the three are gone, but he realizes it would have been silly to say goodbye anyway. Exhausted by the emotions of the weekend, he falls asleep on the floor and then snaps awake on the cold floor of the shack, which looks as it did when he first arrived, down to the bloodstain by the fireplace. He realizes he is back in the real world, or he thinks, smiling, the unreal world.

Mack begins the uneventful drive home, thinking about Nan. He feels at peace and strangely exhilarated. He wants to get home to Kate. Suddenly, another driver plows through a red light at an intersection, slamming into Mack's car. Unconscious, he is airlifted to a nearby hospital.

CHAPTER 18: OUTBOUND RIPPLES

Over the next couple of days, Mack drifts painfully in and out of consciousness as his family and doctors attend to him. Vague memories from his time at the cabin drift into his mind, but it's difficult to tell if they're simply drug-induced dreams. On the third day he awakens to find Willie by his bedside, gruffly reprimanding him for getting so hurt. In a whisper, Willie asks if God was really at the cabin. Suddenly, memories of the weekend coming flooding back with clarity. Mack tells Willie that God is everywhere, so of course he was at the shack. But he also reveals that God said he was particularly fond of Willie. Overcome with emotion, Willie leaves.

When Nan returns, Mack is fully conscious and smiling. She says he was in an accident on Friday night, and he realizes that somehow, his whole experience in the cabin didn't take any time in the real world. He confesses everything to Nan, and asks for her forgiveness for lying. At first she chalks his story up to the accident, but slowly she begins to feel it must be real because it's so vivid.

Mack is confident that he will be able to ask forgiveness from Nan and strengthen their relationship. He does not need to say goodbye to the trinity because he now realizes that God is with him at all times and will not abandon him, a truth that he plans to carry with him even after he leaves the fantastical environment of the shack.



Mack looks forward to bringing the insights he's gained about forgiveness to his real-world relationships. The sudden car crash reveals again that terrible things can happen in the world.



Mack is eager to share his new insights into the true nature of God with Willie, who previously held many of the same mistaken assumptions about God as Mack did. Mack reveals his new deeply held belief that God is with all humans at all time, and therefore can never abandon them. By explaining God's special love for Willie, Mack also shows that he now believes that just as people can form strong personal relationships with one another, God forms special relationships with each person.



Mack has become more comfortable with confessing when he has done wrong and asking for forgiveness, because he realizes that holding on to guilt and judgment prevents him from forming healthy relationships. That in the "real world" Mack's car crash took place on Friday suggests that he never even spent his weekend with God, and that his entire experience was just a kind of "dream" after the accident. Earlier in the book, Mack asked Jesus about whether they were "really" interacting, and Jesus responded that it didn't matter because the truths he was learning were real. Now the book puts Mack in the position to doubt whether what he experienced really happened. But he doesn't doubt at all. He trusts in God.



Nan agrees to find a time for Mack and her to talk to Kate alone, on Mack's request. Holding Kate's hand from his hospital bed, Mack tells Kate that Missy's death was not her fault and that no one blames her for what happened. Sobbing, Kate says she thinks it is her fault for distracting her father's attention in the canoe and thinks that her parents believe this as well. Mack says none of them meant for it to happen, and they'll work through it together. Kate runs from the room crying, but Mack wakes up later to find her sleeping by his side. Seeing he is awake Nan tells him that she believes his story. Her words feel incredibly important.

After about a month of healing, Mack and Nan call officer Tommy Dalton to set up a hike near the shack. Although he doesn't believe the story of Mack's weekend, he agrees to go with them. Together, they follow the trail of red arcs through the woods, just as Mack described. Eventually, they make it to the cave, and Mack realizes that Papa carefully placed the last rock there because he knew Mack would need to find it later. Now convinced, Tommy says they will notify forensic specialists and law enforcement. Experts soon descend on the scene, and recover enough evidence to both find and convict the killer, and to track down the burial places of his other victims.

AFTER WORDS

Mack's friend Willie once again returns as narrator. Willie says that now, *The Great Sadness* has lifted from Mack and he seems to embrace change. He is quick to love and forgive, causing a ripple effect through all his relationships. It seems that he is living the childhood he never got to experience. Furthermore, Mack is hoping to speak with Missy's killer at some point.

Willie says that Mack is hoping for a revolution of love and kindness revolving around Jesus and what he has done for us all. It will be a quiet revolution rooted in daily kindness that will connect everyone with Sarayu, Jesus, and Papa.

Like Mack, Kate is initially reluctant to acknowledge the deep feelings of guilt underlying her grief at the loss of her sister. But when Mack pushes her to explore those difficult feelings, to let them out, she reveals her own fears – that her parents were in fact judging her – and begins to feel better. Kate's change shows that it is sometimes necessary to examine negative feelings rather than suppressing them in order to begin healing, and once again shows the way that forgiveness leads to forgiveness, and connection to connection.



The real-life resolution to the mystery of Missy's death and the bringing to justice of her killer suggests that God does indeed take a personal interest in Mack's life, and that his newfound trust in God is not misplaced.



Since Mac confronted the guilt at the heart of his depression, that depression has lifted, and Mack has been able to enjoy life more profoundly. He has taken the lessons of forgiveness to all of his relationships. And letting go of his deepest judgment for Missy's killer has allowed him to love others more openly and honestly. And his change in behavior and outlook affects not only him, but all those around him.



Willie concludes by tying the positive changes in Mack's relationships to the nature of God, saying that he believes understanding God and God's relationship to people will help people connect to one another more deeply.





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