This is an email Pastor Fred Harris sent to a friend who asked his opinion on The Shack (the book).

I wanted to let you know what I thought of your book! I’m afraid I wasn’t able to get a hold of you when I found a good chunk of time in my schedule so I figured maybe I could write you a book review in written form instead. Feel free to respond back to me in kind if you so desire. I thrive on discussions regarding important stuff such as this. Ah, the wonders of 21st Century technology!

At the outset, I want to say thank you for pointing me towards “The Shack.” I had never heard of it before and for books that make it as successfully as this one apparently did (there was quite the buzz about it on the internet, too), I like to at least be aware of them – especially if they’re making as big of an impact on people’s personal theological perspective as this one apparently did. Hopefully, this review will help you, too, but I know the opportunity to read and ponder this book has already helped me.

First of all, I can see why the book got so popular among Christians. It addresses two major things that have plagued the mind of every believer. 1) How in the world the Trinity works with how the three Persons of the Godhead relate to each other. (It’s because Christians have such a hard time nailing this doctrine down in an understandable manner that false religions find it so easy to use it as a sucker punch to trip us up in our efforts to spread/defend the truth.) 2) It addresses the age old question, “Why in the world does God allow such horrible things to happen to His children?” In his efforts to have God answer this question for us, Young also offered the additional bonus of having God appear extremely relational, approachable, and nurturing. This, too, can be very attractive to the Christian who is trying to base his/her life on a very real relationship with God as opposed to simply following a cold religious tradition. Who among us Christians *wouldn’t* want to just hang out and talk with the Trinity for a whole weekend?

Saying that, however, I think Young tried to do this at a cost. And it’s my personal belief (which I think can be defended biblically) that the cost was too great for me to be able to endorse this as being a good or promotable book. That’s not to say Young is some kind of an evil heretic. To the contrary, I’ve heard his testimony, God has really brought him through a lot. And I don’t believe the theology in his book is too awfully dangerous in and of itself. It’s only a little off of the mark. My concern is for when people will try and build their impressions of God or their own relationships with God on Young’s slightly crooked foundation. Depending on how far people take his beginning declarations as their foundational understanding, the results could be very unstable constructions indeed.

Before I start giving specifics, let me quickly give my reasoning for why it matters. After I read the book and had my own concerns, I was reading some comments on some book review website just to get my finger on the pulse of what other people thought about it. An OVERWHELMING perspective said something to the order of, “I don’t know why some people have to be so rigid and cold in their theology, making it to where they couldn’t enjoy this book. Sure, there might be some parts that aren’t theologically perfect and maybe even a little weird, but if, as a result of this book, people are willing to come into a closer relationship with what they now understand as a deeply loving and caring God, what’s the big deal?”

Let me answer that perspective with an illustration. Let’s say, Bob, that Sally wanted to take you on a cruise to the Bahamas for your anniversary. For a year, in excited anticipation, you read brochures about the different destinations and expeditions available to you with this particular cruise, you investigate the internet regarding everything your particular ship has to offer: food services, entertainments, pools, room accommodations, etc., and you day dream incessantly about the whole adventure. Finally, after a year of waiting, the magical time arrives. You and Sally fly to Florida to get on the boat but upon arrival, she doesn’t get on the boat; she stops at the bottom of the gangplank.

“What are you doing?” you ask. She points to a woman waiting for you on the ship.

“Who’s she?”

“Her name’s Sally. She’s going to go with you on your trip.”

“What? What are you talking about? I’m not going with some other woman named Sally! This is *our* big anniversary trip; we’ve been planning this for a year! Don’t be silly! C’mon, let’s go!”

“But it’s the same trip that you’ve been dreaming about. Same boat, same accommodations, same destinations. And that Sally looks a lot like me. Don’t screw up this cruise by worrying about details, you’re still getting what you’ve been anxiously awaiting all last year.”

Would Bob go on the cruise? Of course not, but that’s what too many Christians are willing to do with God in their faith. As long as we’re going to Heaven, as long as we experience *some* kind of relationship with God, discussions about Who that God actually is are mere trifles not to be worried about. Somehow, we’ve made it a noble Christianity to belittle concepts like “doctrine” and “theology” for the sake of “experience,” “relationship,” and “authenticity.” Truthfully, all these need to happen in conjunction. When we pursue “experience,” “relationship,” and “authenticity” without a healthy “doctrine” and “theology,” it’s too easy to have a great relationship that seems so real and feels so right with a god who ends up being the wrong one because we’ve learned very little about the True One. Throughout Church history, this rarely happened in leaps and bounds, it almost always happened with a series of notches. That’s what I believe Young did. He had so much good stuff in his book, but at the same time, he moved the biblical picture of God just a couple of notches in the wrong direction. In and of themselves, they weren’t THAT big of a deal. But add just a few more notches in the wrong direction to Young’s view, all of a sudden we’re looking at flat-out idolatry. Therefore, it’s worth it to me to come down extra hard on “The Shack” and not let him get away with anything even in the details. After all, we’re not just looking at the side issues, like whether or not the Rapture happens before or after the Tribulation, we’re looking at the very nature and identity of God. It’s everything that’s important to our faith and well worth dissecting.

So, if you’ll indulge me, here’s what I came up with…

On page 65, I ran into my first big warning flag:

*Try as he might, Mack could not escape the desperate possibility that the note just might be from God after all, even if the thought of God passing notes did not fit well with his theological training. In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God’s voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects. It seemed that direct communication with God was something exclusively for the ancients and uncivilized, while educated Westerners’ access to God was mediated and controlled by the intelligentsia. Nobody wanted God in a box, just a book. Especially an expensive one bound in leather with gilt edges, or was that guilt edges?*

Now I understand why he wrote this paragraph in here and why people would find it such a breath of fresh air. We desperately want to have the kind of relationship with God like the way it was portrayed in The Shack, a relationship where He can write us personal notes and we can just hang out like buds with God and talk about what’s *really* on our hearts. Reading the Bible just seems too much like reading *about* God instead of genuinely *experiencing* God in a relationship. We want to have interaction with God that’s so real that we can just set the Bible aside and have Him directly communicate with us rather than having a bunch of millennia-old writings act as go-betweens – especially if those writings can appear confusing and, at times, put us in need of someone to teach us what they mean.

Now of course, Young wasn’t promoting, “Don’t read your Bible.” As a matter of fact, in interviews, he quotes it quite a bit. But the quote I gave you up above definitely had a subversive quality to it. He wasn’t trying to take away our use of the Bible, rather he was throwing stones at the Bible’s unique position as *the most* superior revelation of God, revealing to us His character, His will, and His plan of salvation. Essentially, he dragged the Bible from its superior pedestal down to an equal status with many other experiences that reveal God. For example, on page 195, *“You will learn to hear my thought in yours,”* says Sarayu. And then again on page 198, *“You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa’s goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship – a way of coming to be with us.”*

It was subtle but did you catch it? For Young, the Bible appears to merely be one way that God uses to allow us to see Him, on equal footing with our own thoughts, an appreciation of art or nature, through conversations with other people, and through our own life experiences. The Bible wasn’t given any priority at all! (This was compounded by the fact that I didn’t see God quote it once.) But in truth, the Bible is *the* authority on Who God is and how He acts. There is nothing that we know about God that the Bible doesn’t explain. If there’s something that we don’t know about God that the Bible doesn’t explain, then we’re not supposed to know. And since the Bible is *the* authority, it is what we are to use to interpret our experiences with God that we experience through all those other means. In other words, it’s not just one way on a list of ways that God reveals Himself, it is *the* way that we use to interpret all the other ways. It’s in its own category. Nothing comes close to comparing to it, nothing is available to us that can teach us the way that it can, nothing is available to us that can bring us into a better understanding of God than it can. Nothing… not a shack experience, not a note in a mailbox, nothing.

But why does God make it that way? If He wants to be so intimate with us, if a relationship with us is such a high priority, why does He restrict communication so much that we require a book to hear Him? Why can’t we *all* simply travel to a shack in the woods to have our own life-changing experiences with Him? I mean, if a guy is courting a girl, which would he rather: go over to her house and see her face to face or read a letter from her?

The answer? Our sin. Pure and simple. Until we are completely perfected someday, in all of our being and not just our status, we will have an element of separation from God. This is the way Paul said it:

1 Corinthians 15:50: *“I declare to you, brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”*

1 Corinthians 13:12: *Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see*

*face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”*

When we take those verses together, even if we don’t understand them completely, something is very clear. Something still needs to happen to us before we can know the holy God fully, face to face. We’re still works in progress and it has something to do with the fact that we’re still indwelling these sinful bodies that we inherited from Adam. We can’t handle the fullness of God’s presence yet. And we won’t be able to until we are changed the rest of the way (by receiving new bodies that are untainted by sin). So for now, we need a written go-between (or teachers of a written go-between for the cultures that can’t have Bibles) that He can speak clearly through to tide us over until we can hang out with Him intimately and hear Him clearly with new ears in His kingdom. It’s good that we desire that close intimacy now. It’s good that there’s that part of us that loves that aspect of Young’s book, we’re supposed to desire a shack experience. We’re supposed to be anxious for it like Paul was when he said, “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).” But it can’t be true yet when we’re still the way we are. And to belittle in any way *the* method that God uses to speak to us powerfully and clearly until that time is dangerous. Its absence in our priorities sets us up too easily to fall for any whim of culture, powerful emotion, good story, or charismatic teacher that comes along; because we’ve undercut the value of our only reliable standard of Truth.

Our inability to experience God fully face to face leads me to the next red flag that I ran into: how God presented Himself in the Shack. God the Father showed up as an African-American lady, the Holy Spirit showed up as an Asian woman, and Jesus showed up as a Middle-Eastern man because that’s how He appeared in human history. Now instead of looking at the rightness and wrongness of this picture, let’s look at why Young would use it. I was intrigued by the quote that Young used to introduce the chapter where God revealed Himself in that way: *“…no matter what God’s power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of the absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts himself on our human level and limits himself (p. 88).”* So I’m assuming that Young had God show up in female form so that we could be sure to zero in on God’s putting Himself on our human level and limiting Himself. It’s easier to concentrate on that concept with God appearing as a compassionate nurturer (usually associated with women) rather than appearing as anything that could smack of an authority figure (usually associated with men). And it’s preferable to view God that way since His primary aspect “is never that of absolute Master, the Almighty”, right?

But what if that initial quote was flat wrong, even heretical? The Bible seems to read that the first primary aspect of God *is* His being absolute Master, the Almighty. I talked about this just last Sunday but look how God revealed Himself throughout the Bible when people actually got glimpses of Him or His power. Jacob saw a man who wrenched Jacob’s hip out of joint simply by touching him. Moses saw flames. Pharaoh saw his entire empire come crashing down around him. The people of Israel saw a whole mountain of granite shake violently to the point that they thought they were going to die. Joshua saw God as a Warrior prepared for battle – the Supreme Commander of the heavenly armies. Job, the guy who needed nurturing more than anybody after his ordeal, heard God’s voice through a powerful tornado. God’s words? “Who do you think you are to question anything that I do?” Isaiah saw God as the King sitting in the Temple. His very presence caused Isaiah to call curses down upon himself. Even in the New Testament book of Revelation, John saw Jesus as a terrifying Son of Man and he only saw God the Father’s “feet” as He sat on His throne. See, here’s what I find intriguing in light of Young’s presentation of God. Not one single time, not one, in thousands of years of biblical history did we see God present Himself as the easy-to-approach, ready-to-just-give-a-hug, wanting-to-cook-for-you-and-laugh-with-you god of Young’s shack. The closest we have to God “putting Himself on our human level and limiting Himself” is Jesus, a burly carpenter Who was so intimidating that He threw the money changers out of the Temple and the Temple guards were scared to death to arrest Him. When a crowd of soldiers came to arrest Him in the garden, they all fell down in His presence simply because He said, “I am.” If God’s first aspect were that of a God who limits Himself and puts Himself down to our level, wouldn’t we see *more* glimpses of that instead of vision after vision of His terrifying power, majesty, and glory that consistently set men’s knees to knocking?

So due to Young’s bias, contrary to all the people in the Bible that glimpsed the real presence of God, how did Mac react? He had to keep stifling his anger and he even swore at God twice (vastly different than Isaiah crying out how he was a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips).

Now once again, I understand what Young is up to. He’s trying to convince people to be real with God by showing God as wanting to be real and approachable to us. Admirable motivation, but in the process, I’m afraid Young sacrificed God’s Holiness. Proverbs says that *the fear of God* is the beginning of wisdom. An awe and respect of God is the biblical starting point in our understanding of Him. Young would have us believe that the starting point is understanding God’s love for us. What Young and many Christians today fail to see is that by belittling God’s awesome power and fearsome presence, they’re also belittling His love. For God to love us when He appears to be so much like us (to the point of being clutsy enough to spill sauce all over the floor (p. 104)) isn’t all that hard to believe. For God to love us enough to give His Son when He’s more on the level of a nuclear physicist in comparison to us as being on the level of brain-dead cockroaches (*evil* brain dead cockroaches that are constantly shaking our little legs in the air saying how much we don’t really need Him or want Him), now that kind of love will blow us away. God’s FIRST aspect really is absolute Master, the Almighty. Once we understand that, only then are we ready to grasp the significance of God being willing to adopt us as children at the cost of His Son’s life. (The Bible says that we were children of the devil before that, by the way [1 John 3:8-10]. Young would have us believe that everyone is already a child of God, already forgiven but merely estranged from God in relationship until they accept the truth.)

In light of Young’s reluctance to refer to God as Master or Almighty God, he had an interesting take on hierarchy, both within the Trinity and in our relationship with God. His unique perspective served as warning flag number 3:

*“Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command or ‘great chain of being’ as your ancestors termed it. 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. Actually, this is your problem, not*

*ours (p. 122).*

It was a noble wrong, but I’m afraid it was wrong all the same. Here’s where he was right. All the three Persons of the Godhead want the same things. There are no internal struggles or disagreements with God the Father wanting one thing and the Holy Spirit wanting another so that God the Father finally has to lay down the law. They are all united in desire, in purpose, in will. But there being an absence of hierarchy or order of command within the Godhead just isn’t in the Bible. Actually, it’s quite to the contrary. Not only was Jesus in subjection to the Father’s authority when He was on Earth to complete His mission (earning righteousness that He could give away by being obedient), He’s even going to be under the Father’s authority at the end of the Messianic kingdom once everything is perfected and sin is completely abolished. 1 Corinthians 15:24-28:

*Then the end will come, when He [Jesus] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after He has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power. For He must reign until He [the Father] has put all His enemies under His [Jesus’] feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For He “has put everything under His feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under Him, it is clear that this does not include God Himself, who put everything under Christ. When He has done this,* ***then the Son Himself will be made subject to Him [the Father]*** *Who put everything under Him [Jesus], so that God may be all in all.*

Did you see it? We get the idea of a Messianic Kingdom that will last for 1,000 years in Revelation. If we insert that idea here, we see that God the Father is going to use that Messianic kingdom to topple all dominions and authorities (earthly and demonic) and place them under Jesus’ feet. Then after everything is conquered (which will happen in one final battle at the close of the Messianic reign), Jesus is going to present everything back to His Father, *with Himself being subject to Him*. Looks like a hierarchy to me since we NEVER see the Father place Himself in subjection to Jesus.

In the same way, the Holy Spirit is subject to both of them. John 14:15-17a:

*If you love Me, you will obey what I command. And* ***I will ask the Father****, and* ***He will give*** *you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth.*

Since the Father is going *to send* the Spirit, and Jesus is going to *ask* the Father to send the Spirit (rather than the Spirit just coming because that’s what They all three want), this passage clearly smacks of hierarchy. Especially since, once again, we never see any indication of the Spirit sending the Father anywhere and we never see Jesus asking permission from the Holy Spirit for anything.

Then Jesus talks again about the coming of the Holy Spirit from a different perspective just a little bit later. John 16:7b:

*Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go,* ***I will send Him*** *to you.*

So somehow, in a way that Jesus doesn’t really explain, Jesus takes part in the sending of the Holy Spirit, too. Meaning, the Holy Spirit is also subject to Jesus as well as the Father – hierarchy. Now this little detail might not matter quite as much here, since admittedly there are tons of things about the Trinity that we don’t really understand, but Young then carries over his incorrect teaching into OUR relationship with God.

*As the crowning glory of Creation, you were made in our image, unencumbered by structure and free to simply ‘be’ in relationship with me and one another. If you had truly learned to regard each other’s concerns as significant as your own, there would be no need for hierarchy (p. 124).*

In other words, if only we acted as loving as we should, if only we lived in a sinless society (which we will someday after we’ve been completely transformed), we wouldn’t need a relationship with God as a hierarchy, either. We would simply want what He wants and would commune with Him without having to be subject to Him. Young says this more clearly later:

 *“To force my will on you,” Jesus replied, “is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission even when your choices are not helpful or healthy.*

 *“That’s the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him, or Sarayu to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect.* ***In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.****”*

 *Mack was surprised. “How can that be? Why would the God of the universe want to be submitted to me?”*

 *“Because we want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don’t want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me (pp. 145-146).*

I’m afraid Young crossed a line here. Most of his stuff so far that I’ve discussed (not paying attention right now to the stuff he got right) has been wrong, but not dangerously so. I felt like he was at least wrong for good reasons. This thought right here, though – it’s nigh onto blasphemous. God makes it very clear that He loves to serve us because in His eyes, the greatest in His kingdom is the Servant of all. So for Him to be seen as the absolute Greatest, He has to serve everyone without anyone serving Him. Therefore, contrary to many sermons that have been preached, we as Christians can never truly serve God in the way that we think we do, He can only serve us. Even when we *think* we’re serving Him, we’re serving Him using the power, direction, and motivation given to us by the Holy Spirit; so we’re still not really serving Him in the way that we assume, the Holy Spirit is. And then when the Holy Spirit does serve the Father using us, the Father rewards US for it rather than the Holy Spirit, so He’s serving us even more.

Now here’s the result of this process that God desires so much. The more God serves us, the more praise and glory He gets from His people. In our hearts and minds, His Name becomes even greater and holier than it was before. Did you catch that? Paradoxically, the more God serves us, the higher, holier, and more set apart from us He appears. He doesn’t appear *closer* to our level.

Here’s how what I’m saying is different than what Young was saying. God is a servant, but He is NEVER submissive. We’ve already talked about how God the Father was never shown as being subject or submissive to the Son and Holy Spirit, but He’s DEFINITELY never described as being submissive to us. So how are submission and service different? With God serving, according to His economy, His service elevates Him from us even more in our perspective. Or to use a word picture, in our eyes, His throne gets even higher. The *technical definition* of submission, on the other hand, means to voluntarily place oneself under another’s will. It means, at some point, for some situations, when we’re in a perfect relationship with Him and finally have perfect desires, God voluntarily steps off of His throne and places us on it and basically asks, “So what would like Me to do? I’ll submit to it.” That’s blasphemy. God is *never* at the beck and call to our will at any time. The only time He answers a request from us in the affirmative is when we’re praying for what His Spirit told us to pray for in the first place, so it’s still us being submissive and obedient to Him.

I make the point to say that I was giving the “technical definition” of submission because I don’t think this was what Young was trying to say. That’s just the danger of how people can use what he said. What Young was saying was almost as bad, however. Young would never say that God steps off of His throne and places us on it. He was saying that God takes the throne away altogether. With this mutual submission thing, either God is coming down to our level or we’re elevated up to His level but the end result is the same. We’re at the same level as God as brothers and sisters instead of there being anything that even closely resembles a hierarchy between Creator and Creation. Not making us gods, mind you. Even in Young’s theology God will be a different Being than us. He’ll always be God and we’ll always be human. But Young was still attempting to put us on the same interactive level as God through this mutually submissive relationship. That’s nothing more than the blasphemy that been around since Adam and Eve’s first sin – man trying to elevate himself to being on God’s level. But it will never happen. That’s why The Father *and* The Lamb are still seated on the throne even in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 22). The hierarchy is *never* disposed of.

Warning flag number 4:

Young’s description of the Trinity was a little weird. It did make the Trinity more understandable but I think there’s a reason why the Trinity has never been very understandable before. Specifically, here’s what I’m referring to:

 *Papa didn’t answer, only looked down at their hands. His gaze followed hers and for the first time Mack noticed the scars in her wrists, like those he now assumed Jesus also had on his. She allowed him to tenderly touch the scars, outlines of a deep piercing, and he finally looked up again into her eyes. Tears were slowly making their way down her face, little pathways through the flour that dusted her cheeks.*

 *“Don’t ever think that what my son chose to do didn’t cost us dearly. Love always leaves a significant mark,” she stated softly and gently. “We were there together.”*

 *Mack was surprised. “At the cross? Now wait, I thought you left him – you know – My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” It was a Scripture that had often haunted Mack in The Great Sadness.*

 *“You misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what he felt at that moment, I never left him (pp. 95-96).”*

Then later, Papa continued…

 *“When we three spoke ourself into human existence as the Son of God, we became fully human. We also chose to embrace all the limitations that this entailed. Even though we have always been present in this created universe, we now became flesh and blood. It would be like this bird, whose nature it is to fly, choosing only to walk and remain grounded. He doesn’t stop being the bird, but it does alter his experience of life significantly (p. 99).”*

I’m not sure how dangerous this is, it’s just screwy. There’s no indication that God the Father ever became human within Jesus or that God the Father ever limited Himself in the way that Jesus did. So I’m not sure why Young would make such a big deal about it (and it was a big deal to him, he emphatically emphasized it in an interview I saw) – except that maybe Young was trying to make the point that God the Father loves us as much as Jesus does. The cross cost the Father as much as Jesus. Maybe Young was trying to battle the prejudice that really does exist against the Father in favor of Jesus because in the minds of many Christians, God the Father often seems so mean and judgmental and Jesus seems so loving and self-sacrificial. Once again, a noble motivation because it’s true that the Father loves us just as much as Jesus does, but unfortunately, the way he tried to accomplish this was just wrong. And here’s what it cost him.

First of all, it cost part of the truth about what the cross accomplished. On the cross, Jesus paid for the sin of every believer. For Him to do that, He had to experience the full reality of Hell in our place. What is the reality of Hell? The full wrath of God being poured out on the sinner: resulting in pain, suffering, loneliness, shame, and most traumatically, **separation from God.** If God the Father was on the cross and never really separated from Jesus and Jesus merely *felt* separated (Jesus was wrong?), then the most crucial part of the penalty for our sin has not yet been paid. Jesus has not yet experienced it in our place. So in one swoop, Young either changed what Jesus really did on the cross or he changed the meaning and true terror of Hell. I think he did it unintentionally, but it’s where his screwy doctrine leads him if one carries it far enough.

It also cost him Jesus’ unique position of being our High Priest before the Father as described in Hebrews. In Hebrews, only Jesus is described as the High Priest because only He understands our weaknesses and temptations because only He walked a mile in our human shoes. In Young’s version, Jesus no longer has that unique position because all Three did what Jesus did – became human. I can’t necessarily see a self-destructive end to this train of thought except that if you believe it, you would have to cut out huge chunks of the book of Hebrews where it describes Jesus as being the superior mediator between God and man. Jesus is no longer needed in that role because all three went through it together. So now all three must be mediators between man and themselves. Weird.

Last one. You still with me? I’m not writing this all in one sitting so hopefully, you’re not feeling obligated to read this all in one sitting, either. I’m not sure I could. My brain can only handle so much at one time.

The entire reason that I felt like Young wrote this book was to attempt to answer the question, “Why God allows bad things to happen to good people.” It makes me nervous when people try to put words in God’s mouth to explain this (which is what people do when they use anything but the Bible – God’s own words – to give an answer), because they almost always get it wrong. This is true because anything other than the words of the Bible are still from a human perspective and from our perspective, we’ll never understand *why* God does or does not do anything. Young was no exception. Here’s his stab at it:

 *[Mac said,] “But he didn’t stop it.”*

 *[Sophia answered,] “No, he didn’t. He doesn’t stop a lot of things that cause him pain. Your world is severely broken. You demanded your independence, and now you are angry with the one who loved you enough to give it to you (p. 164).”*

 *“But I still don’t understand why Missy had to die.”*

 *“She didn’t have to, Mackenzie. This was no plan of Papa’s. Papa has never needed evil to accomplish his good purposes. It is you humans who have embraced evil and Papa has responded with goodness (p. 165).”*

 *[Papa said,] “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 that I caused it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. That will only lead you to false notions about me (p. 185).”*

So here’s Young’s teaching and it’s actually the majority of the teaching that I hear from evangelical churches out there today: “The reason God allows men to do evil things to each other is because He loves us enough to let us make our own decisions. He didn’t plan any of these bad things to happen, He only plans good things. But because evil men make their free decisions, bad things happen. But don’t despair! God is still capable of turning horrible situations into happy endings.”

Now here are the benefits of thinking this way: 1) God *appears* more loving. 2) We still get a happy ending. Here are the downfalls of thinking this way: 1) It’s anti-biblical.

2) In an attempt to make God more loving, we’ve actually made Him less sovereign since now His plans are dependent upon man’s freewill decisions instead of the other way around.

Those are pretty big accusations, huh? But here’s why I make them. If Young followed out the logic of the statements that he put into God’s mouth, where would his logic take him? God didn’t *plan* for Missy to get killed. So what *did* God plan for Missy? That she live to a ripe old age? Get married? Have a few children that God was already *planning* to create? After all, Young’s God only plans good happy things, right? So what are we saying when bad things happen instead like Missy getting raped and murdered and *not* living to a ripe old age, *not* getting married, *not* having the children that God was planning to create? Bottom line: we’re saying that because of someone’s free choice, God’s good plans got screwed up. And that statement isn’t even found within the realm of possibility within the pages of the Bible. Here are a few biblical samples that teach the opposite of what God supposedly said in Young’s book:

*The Job replied to the Lord: “I know that You can do all things; no plan of Yours can be thwarted.” – Job 42:1-2*

*But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations. – Ps. 33:11*

*I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.*

 *– Ps. 135:6*

*All the days ordained [definition: planned] for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be. – Ps. 139:16*

*All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven and the people of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” – Da. 4:35*

That’s just a smattering but you get the idea. All of those verses and others like them explicitly say that if God planned for Missy to live a long and healthy life and produce children whose lives God also planned out, she *was going* to live a long healthy life and produce those children. There wasn’t a human being on the planet powerful enough or free enough to get in His way. That should give us tremendous feelings of security and it should instill trust in Him. But since we’ve taken that truth away – situational ethics have replaced it.

Let’s take this out of the realm of the intellectual and make it practical shall we? You’re a Christian during WWII hiding a Jew. A Nazi comes up to ask you about it. Is it okay for you to lie? I might have, too, but that isn’t the question. The question is, is it a sin or not to lie in this situation? Whether you believe Young or the Bible will directly influence your decision. If you believe Young, and God is just sitting up there granting independence to everyone because He loves everyone so much, by all means, lie for all you’re worth because even if God does plan for you and those Jews to live to see tomorrow, it doesn’t matter. That Nazi is just about to ruin God’s plans. On the other hand, if you believe the Bible, find a way to tell the truth because that Nazi has no power over you if God has already planned for you to survive. What Nazi was stronger than God? Stronger than you? Yes. But not stronger than God.

Here’s a more modern one. A drug-user girl with an abusive boyfriend just got pregnant. The boyfriend won’t allow the baby to undergo adoption because he feels that it would be an assault to his responsibility as a man. But he would allow for an abortion. As a result of the heavy drug abuse, this baby will be born with all kinds of defects, brain damage, and it will grow up in a horrible home life. Would an abortion be admissible and even merciful in this one instance? Depends on whether you believe Young or the Bible. In Young, that baby just resulted from man’s independence. God would never plan a baby to be born into that kind of suffering and He would never plan for a baby to have those kinds of deformities. The whole “fearfully and wonderfully made” talk of Ps. 139 must only refer to normal babies. So maybe the best thing would be to keep that baby from suffering by letting him be aborted before he’s even developed a nervous system. OR if you believe the Bible, that baby has been a part of the plan of God since before the foundation of the world. All of his days were planned for him before one of them came to be. So best not to interfere, otherwise the parents will be fighting directly against God’s plan – and they’ll lose. See why it matters?

 But if God’s plans can’t get thwarted, where does that place evil? Either, God just doesn’t make plans – which we know that isn’t true – or He really did plan the evil to happen, right? Can He do that? I preached this in church not too long ago, but here’s a list of some of the things that God is fully capable of doing without tarnishing His character, justice, or love (these verses are shocking enough that I encourage you not to take my word for it – look them up) [BE SURE TO READ AND PONDER ALL OF THESE, SAM!!! Notice they’re Old AND New Testament. I’ve let other people read this letter before you and I can tell by some of their comments that not all of them wrestled with this entire next section about what the Bible REALLY says regarding this issue. They just skimmed it so the Bible wasn’t able to speak for itself. Therefore, they weren’t forced to really think about it or grapple with it. They were able to comfortably just keep saying and thinking what they had always said and thought from their human perspective - which is totally different from the God Who says, “I just don’t think like you”.]

*Ex. 4:11: God told Moses that He was the One responsible for making a man deaf, blind, or mute.*

*Ex 7:3-5: Before the Bible mentions Pharaoh hardening his own heart, God promised that He was going to harden Pharaoh’s heart for him so that God could perform His miracles and show His power to His people and to the Egyptians.*

*Dt. 2:30: God hardened the heart of a king named Sihon so that He could pick a fight between the Israelites and Sihon.*

*Dt. 32:39: God is described as being the One Who kills, gives life, injures, and heals.*

*Ju. 9:22-23: God sent an evil spirit to start a civil war in Israel.*

*Ju. 14:4: It was God’s idea that Samson fall in love with a Philistine so He could start a war between Samson and the Philistines.*

*1 Sm. 2:4-7: Hannah sang a song that says God makes a person powerful or weak, God makes a person hungry or well-fed, God makes a person barren or bountiful, God kills or makes alive, God makes a person rich or poor.*

*1 Samuel 15:1-3: God commanded King Saul to engage in complete genocide.*

*1 Sm 18:10: God sent an evil spirit to torment King Saul, which drove him insane and led to the need for a new king.*

*2 Sm 12:11: God promised to raise up evil forces in David’s household, which of course resulted in David’s sons committing rape, murder, and treason.*

*2 Sm. 12:15: God struck David’s little baby with a sickness that later killed him.*

*2 Sm. 24:1-14: Because God was angry at the whole nation of Israel, He incited David to take a sinful census that would result in the death of 70,000 people.*

*1 Ki. 12:15: God was the one that set up the events that led to Jeroboam rebelling against Rehoboam and splitting the kingdom of Israel into two.*

*1 Ki. 22:19-23: God sent a lying spirit to deceive a king into getting himself killed.*

*2 Ki. 19:7: God promised to put a spirit in Sennacharib so that he would listen to a rumor and go home, mainly so Sennacharib would stop bothering the kingdom of Judah. Then God promised to cause Sennacharib’s death once he got home.*

*2 Ki. 17:25: God sent wild lions to start mauling Samaritans so that they would fear Him as the One True God. ( Not exactly the seeker friendly model, huh?)*

*Jb. 1:22: Job said, “The Lord gives, the Lord takes away.”*

*Jb. 2:10: Job asked his wife, “Should we accept good from God and not accept adversity?”*

*Ps. 105:10-26: Going over Jewish history, the Psalmist said that God sent a famine, then sent Joseph to save the people from it by bringing his family into Egypt, then God caused the Egyptians to hate the Israelites.*

*Pr. 16:9: Man makes his plans but God determines the individual steps that he’s going to actually take.*

*Pr. 21:1: God directs the hearts of kings wherever He wants them to go.*

*Is. 45:7: God creates prosperity and disaster.*

*Je. 52:1-3: God brought about the reign of Judah’s last king, Zedekiah, and brought about his rebellion against Nebecchudnezzar, which resulted in the final fall of Jerusalem.*

*Lm. 3:37-38: From God’s mouth or from God’s decree come both the good and the bad.*

*Am. 3:6: God asks, “Does disaster come to a city unless God has caused it?”*

*Acts 4:27-28: God planned everything out to crucify Jesus, the most righteous and innocent Man in history. (Why are we okay with this one more than the others?)*

*Rm. 9:16: Paul says God’s choice doesn’t depend on the man who runs or the man who wills, but on God Who has mercy.*

*Rm. 11:25-26: God hardened the nation of Israel in part so that the gospel would be spread to Gentiles.*

*2 Co. 12:7: Paul, when he was a Christian, said that God gave him a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan, to keep him humble.*

*Eph. 1:11: God works all things according to His will.*

*Ja. 4:14-15: James says that we should make our plans with the knowledge that it’s only by God’s will that we’ll even be here tomorrow.*

*1 Thessalonians 3:3: Paul told the Thessalonians that they were destined to suffer.*

*1 Pt. 4:19: Peter talks about Christians suffering according to the will of God.*

*Rv. 17:17: God put it in the hearts of ten kings to give their earthly power to the AntiChrist so that he’ll be powerful enough to wage war against the Lamb and the saints, which will lead to the slaughter of countless numbers of Christians.*

Shell-shocked yet? I flooded you with a ton of verses like these (there are a ton more just like them) on purpose in an attempt to overwhelm you because I think God’s ways are overwhelming, period. I think we’re supposed to laugh in surrender at even trying to speculate like Young does as to *why* God does anything. God is so far above us, so unlike Young’s Trinity, that I think there’s a reason He never bothers even attempting to explain Himself. There’s a reason Young had to make it all up. God explaining to us pediddly little creatures why He makes the plans He does would be like me trying to explain to my little one-year-old Jack why I would intentionally cause him pain by having a doctor come into a room and stab him with numerous sharp metal objects.

BUT that’s not to say that we ignore the topic completely. What we still have to deal with is the fact that God DOES seem to want us to know (judging by the amount of passages that say so) that He’s the One behind the bad things, even the horrific things. So our only viable option if we’re going to believe the Bible at all is not to pretend like He’s not behind the bad things, like Young and numerous other Christians try to do, but our option is to admit that He *is* behind them and then decide whether or not we’re still willing to place our faith in Him.

If I can guess what you must be thinking after reading the previous two paragraphs and previous list of passages, I’m guessing that you might be feeling your blood pressure rise just a little. Why? Because we’re not merely talking about what God does, are we? With white hot verses like those, we’re suddenly talking about Who God *is.* And to honestly believe that God is capable of doing all the things that those passages say that God is capable of doing – that changes in our minds Who we think He is, right? Which is exactly why this matters so much and it’s not just “theology and doctrine that’s a little off” like people were claiming when they were trying to say the errors in Young’s book weren’t that big of a deal. To completely ignore the truth of those passages and put the exact opposite words in God’s mouth is like Bob deciding to get on the cruise ship with a different Sally.

So let me close this incredibly long letter by defending Who God is in light of what the Bible says He really does do. Because if we’re not careful, we’ll get pictures in our minds of a God Who really isn’t all that loving or caring or just at all. Instead, we’ll start imagining Him as a power-hungry, arrogant God Who’s vindictive, spiteful, and sometimes just plain mean. Let me attempt to defend Him by bringing your attention to two things that we know simply because the Bible tells us so.

The first thing that we know is our identity in God’s eyes before He saves us. Young would have us believe that we’re all children of God, just some are more rebellious than others. That’s not the Bible’s take on who we are. Here are a few passages that say quite the opposite:

*As for you,* ***you were dead in your transgressions and sins****, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires*

*and thoughts. Like the rest,* ***we were by nature objects of wrath****. – Ephesians 2:1-2*

*The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in His heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man,* ***even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood…*** *- Genesis 8:21a*

***The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure****. Who can understand it? – Jeremiah 17:9*

“*Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge.*  ***Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”*** *– Psalm 51:4-5*

*As it is written, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.” – Romans 3:10*

*The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. – 1 Corinthians 2:14*

And then there’s the one that I mentioned previously:

***He who does what is sinful is of the devil****, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. – 1 John 3:8*

So to sum those up, every single human being has been sinful since the time they were conceived. We were spiritually dead in our sins and because of our sinful nature were objects of His wrath. Our hearts were deceitful to ourselves and to others more than anything else. None of us, on our own, did what was right or sought after a relationship with God. The things of God were foolish to us. We resembled the devil and his sinful ways more than we resembled God.

So the mystery shouldn’t be, “Why doesn’t God protect us from suffering?” My goodness, the mystery SHOULD be, “Why doesn’t God kill us all right now in the worst possible way imaginable?!” It’s way more amazing that He would ever give the promise that His plan, once it all works out, is to prosper us believers and not to harm us, to give us hope and a future. If He thinks that suffering will build my character and trust in Him, okay. I won’t argue because I know that in reality, I deserve that suffering multiplied to the nth degree as a punishment, not as a teaching tool. I’m just excited that He’s promised it will all work out towards good when I love Him.

Second thing that I need to mention to defend God’s identity in light of the knowledge that God is behind all the bad is HOW He plans the bad. Let’s talk about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as an example since we’ve been talking about him on Sunday mornings most recently. This is how it DIDN’T happen:

God: Pharaoh, let My people go!

Pharaoh: Hmmm. Okay, maybe I will because You seem really powerful and scary to me.

God: Wait! No, don’t really let My people go because I want to destroy your country to show how powerful I am.

Pharaoh: Okay, fine. I WON’T let Your people go!

God: Ah-hah! Since you won’t let My people go, I’m going to send yet another really mean plague upon your kingdom!

If that were the way it happened, Pharaoh would be a mere puppet and God would be tempting Pharaoh to sin. Neither of which is true. So here’s how it could have really worked, preserving God’s character at the same time. God could have said, “Pharaoh, let My people go!” Pharaoh, being spiritually dead, child of the devil, considering the things of God to be foolish, having a deceitful heart, having every inclination of his heart being evil since childhood, could have thought something to himself in the order of, “Hmmm, I don’t know this God or why I should obey Him, so I think the answer is ‘No.’” He might have even been tempted to kill a whole bunch of the people in retaliation for the plagues, or at the very least kill Moses. God prohibited him from taking any action like that. But He did not prohibit Pharaoh from thinking his spiritually ignorant/arrogant thoughts. And God deliberately did NOT give Pharaoh the required supernatural spiritual insight (grace) that would have overrode his spiritually dead nature and thus enabled him to think, “Wait a minute! I know Who God is! He’s the Almighty God Who’s way more powerful than I am so I should do what He says!” Instead, He withheld His grace from Pharaoh. He turned Pharaoh over to his own foolish thoughts; He might have even allowed Satan to come in and add some credence to what Pharaoh was already thinking so that Pharaoh would become even more stubborn. As a result, everything fell into place to perfectly accomplish God’s pre-determined PLAN that yes, brought TREMENDOUS suffering upon the Egyptian people who had no part in Pharaoh making his decision. But because they were idolatrous children of the devil, too, they deserved it. Once again, the mystery isn’t that God brought all the suffering upon the average Egyptian household. The mystery should be that God spared the Israelites from any of it when they were just as bad. But that’s hard for us to fathom from our human point of view. We automatically think that God somehow *owes* everyone His grace and mercy (making it no longer grace and mercy, by the way), otherwise He can’t be a good or loving God. That’s why, once again, it’s absolutely crucial to strive to see things from the Bible’s point of view. Otherwise, this stuff will never make sense.

Wow! This was long. No wonder it took me three days to write it! In summary, I didn’t think it was a good book, theologically speaking - BUT I hope its story and this commentary on it gives you brain food that will result in a greater awe and understanding of our God. Because the more that we understand Who HE says He is, the more fun and fulfilling our final Cruise will be.

In His Grip,

Fred