Why Our Expectations of God Are Unrealistic

In my last blog post I talked about "Unrealistic Expectations" and promised to explore some of the reasons our expectations of God are unrealistic (and thus why we get frustrated or even furious with Him). I mentioned several ways in which we think God *should* act. Here are my responses to why those expectations are unrealistic.

• *Show the same grace to all of us by treating us all the same*

No child ever has to be taught about fairness. The heart's cry for justice is part of our design. But we are broken in our understanding of so many things, and we usually equate fairness with equality. We want God to treat everyone the same way. But God isn't doing the same thing in everyone; He is creating a masterpiece that will bring glory to Him and goodness to us for all eternity, and His means and tools will differ from person to person. Creating a masterpiece of sculpture in a piece of marble takes different tools and techniques than creating a masterpiece of an oil painting. It's a good thing that God doesn't treat us all the same.

• *Give us an easy life*

Easy, sheltered, enabled lives produce spoiled, entitled children. God's intention is that we grow up to maturity, which necessitates learning to survive the bumps in the road and the harder aspects of living in a fallen world. He is creating an adult, glorious bride for the Lamb, who is fit to reign with Him. An easy life is completely inadequate to the task of preparing us as the church to become the bride of Christ.

• *If I do all the right things to be "a good person," God should do His part to make life work the way I want it to*

That linear “A ensures B” kind of thinking makes sense to our limited, immature minds, but reality doesn’t work that way. We cannot manipulate God to make life work the way we want it to. We are part of a much bigger picture that involves spiritual warfare, the battle against our own flesh, and God’s purposes that can only be accomplished in ways we don’t understand in the process.

One of the most important places of understanding God wants us to reach is the profound truth I saw on a t-shirt once:

2 essential truths:
1. There is a God.
2. You are not him.

God is God, and we are not. We don’t get to dictate the way life works, and God will lovingly bring us to the point, as many times as necessary, where we let go of the illusion that we are in control.

He is in control. We are not. And that’s a good thing.

But the granddaddy of unrealistic, albeit understandably so, expectations are these:

• *Protect the innocent from pain and suffering*
• *Protect the people who maybe-aren’t-so-innocent-but-not-as-bad-as-axe-murderers from pain and suffering*

This is really the bottom line issue for most problems with our understanding of God, the age-old difficult question, “How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?”

The bottom line answer is that because of the sinful choices of Adam and Eve, we all live in a world where evil and suffering were unleashed. Our world is now fallen and corrupt, and bad things happen all the time. Part of the equation is that God honors our choices, which are significant and real—even the choices that bring unintended consequences of

pain and suffering. Yet God is in control, and He can redeem even the most heinous choices and the most awful pain and suffering. He delights to exchange “a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair” (Isaiah 61:3).

We have a hard time imagining how God can bring good out of evil, and especially out of our pain. Sometimes it’s even harder when we look outside ourselves, to the suffering of innocent children such as the growing number of children abused and murdered by their mothers’ boyfriends. And I really don’t have an answer for that; I just know that God is good, and He is loving, and my inability to see how He will make it all okay in the end does not affect whether it’s true or not.

One of my favorite stories comes from my dear friend whom I’ll call Emily, who was not only raped repeatedly by her father from the time she was two years old, but he would take money from his friends so they could abuse her as well. Emily has a vibrant relationship with Jesus, especially because she has learned to listen to Him.

One day after the Holy Spirit gently restored a vivid memory of one of these gang-rape sessions for her to process, she said, “Jesus, I had a sense of being covered in something heavy, like a stack of blankets, while the abuse was going on. What was that about?” The Lord lovingly told her, “That was Me lying on top of you, protecting you from the full brunt of the abuse you were experiencing. The men had to come through Me to get to you, and I took a portion of their evil into Myself before it got to you.” Through her tears, she asked, “But why? How could there possibly be any good to come out of that horrific sexual abuse?” Jesus said, “Beloved, you are a diamond of great value. Every incident of abuse that you sustained was a hammer and chisel in My Father’s hands, creating a new facet in the diamond. When you see the finished product, you won’t believe the stunning beauty of the jewel

that you are. And you will say it was worth it."

(Incidentally, Emily hasn't had to wait till heaven to start seeing the value of her horrific suffering. She has been able to be "Jesus with skin on" to other wounded women and children because she understands their suffering.)

The reason our expectations of God are so often unrealistic is because He is so much bigger, so much more glorious, so much more loving, so much more in control, than we can possibly comprehend. May we grow in our understanding as He continues to prove Himself faithful and good—in everything.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_our_expectations_of_god_are_unrealistic on Oct. 26, 2010.

What I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up

I have the privilege of helping to moderate an online forum for women who struggle with same-sex attraction. One of the things that all the people in this ministry share is a history of hurtful relationships with their families, especially their same-sex parent. (With some of them, the major wound came from not connecting with their same-sex peers as they were growing up, but all of them have some level of difficulty with their parents.)

Someone started a discussion thread called "Things I Wish I'd Heard Growing Up." In addition to making my heart break, I thought this list, from a variety of ladies, was also

instructive about what love sounds and looks like:

Ruth, you are beautiful. You mean the world to me.
You are important in my life.
You have a gift.
I love you.

We love you no matter what.
We accept you no matter what.
You are “perfect” in my eyes.
You are beautiful to me.
I love you just the way you are!

You are important
I want you

You are smart
I love you (from my dad)
God loves you just the way you are
You are special to me
You are worth everything to me
I’d do anything for you

We wanted you
You are important
Your feelings matter
I won’t drink/do drugs anymore
Your dad loves you

You matter.

Something I wish I'd seen: my parents looking happy to see me.

What would YOU like to do?
I'm glad you're a girl and it's all right to be, 'cause it's safe.
I don't need to touch you. I can just love you.
You can fail and I'll still love you.

No matter what happens to you, we will still love you.
You don't have to be perfect, we will still love you.
I believe you.
Don't ever be afraid to tell or ask us anything. We won't hate you or disbelieve you. We will do our best to help you. Even if we are afraid or nervous sometimes.

Something I wish I'd seen and heard: My parents praying with each other, depending on each other, being transparent with each other.

I never met my biological father; he died two months before I was supposed to meet him. I always wish I could have heard him say he loved me and was proud of me. I wish I could have hugged him.

I wish my mom would have said, "Hey, let's spend some time together," and not have it be because she wanted to lecture me on something.

You are worth my time.
Let me do that for you.
You have done a great job (and not followed by a "but…" that wipes out what was just said)

I wish I was told that I was lovable and likeable

And here are mine:

I’m sorry you had polio. Tell me about what it’s like to live with a handicap. Tell me what your heart feels about that.

You are not damaged goods, and you don’t have to strive to prove yourself acceptable. You already are.

Lord, these are the cries of so many of our hearts. Let us hear You affirming us, loving us, singing over us with joy, telling us that You delight in us!

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/what_i_wish_id_heard_growing_up on April 14, 2009.

What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo blog post about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own

daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."
• "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
• "At least he's in heaven now."
• "At least you have two other children."
• "At least that's one less mouth you'll have to feed."
• "At least it didn't have to go through the pain of birth."
• "At least you've had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis."

Don't attempt to minimize the other person's pain.
• "Cancer isn't really a problem." (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
• "It's okay, you can have other children."

Don't try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.
• "I guess God knew you weren't ready to be parents yet."
• "Now you'll find out who your friends are."
• "This baby must have just not been meant to be."
• "There must have been something wrong with the baby."
• "Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great works."
• "Cancer is really a blessing."
• "Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong."

Don't blame the other person:
• "If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed."
• "Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in."
• "You are not praying hard enough."
• "Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?"

• “Oh, you’re not going to let this get you down, are you?” (Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

Don’t compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else’s problem:
• “It’s not as bad as that time I. . .”
• “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

Don’t use the word “should”:
• “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

Don’t use clichés and platitudes:
• “Look on the bright side.”
• “He’s in a better place.”
• “She’s an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
• “He’s with the Lord.”

Don’t instruct the person:
• “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
• “Remember that God is in control.”
• “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

What TO say:
• “I love you.”
• “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

What TO do:
• A wordless hug.
• A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
• Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It's the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/ on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

"I Don't Feel God's Love or Presence"

I don't feel God's presence or love. I know this sounds like a nonchristian "question," but I know 100% I am a Christian! I've been through so many hard things in my life; for instance, my dad, a professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, died of brain cancer when I was a little kid. That's just one thing. It feels like the more and more I live for God, the more my life falls apart. I feel like He has abandoned me. I know David wrote in the Psalms about feeling alone, but I've never heard about anyone not feeling God's love. Please help! I feel completely alone!

I'm sorry for the loss of your father. I'm truly devastated to hear that you don't feel God's presence. If you think you're the only one to feel that way, please don't. I certainly have felt isolation and separation from God. Sometimes it was the result of my unrepentant sin. Other times, I felt that calamity had unfairly fallen on me and wondered if God cared about my situation. Despite it all, I'm still here. I'm still a Christian and a stronger believer because of the things I've suffered.

King David experienced much grief and despair during his reign over Israel. When he wrote much of the book of Psalms, he did

not just include the happy times of life; he included the full range of negative emotions: bad, sad, melancholy, depression, hopelessness, fear, sorrow, hurt, anger—you name it. Psalm 88 is probably the epitome of the depths of human brokenness. He felt as if he were in the darkest depths, surrounded only by unrelenting grief. David felt the terrible sting of death—those who were closest to him were taken away and he himself felt abandoned and forgotten by God (which is like death itself). The king had no idea why terrible things were happening to him and his soul was in anguish because of it.

In the face of terrible suffering, there is one thing David never included in the Psalms—faithlessness. Even at the deepest valley of his misery, David gave God praise and appealed his case before the Lord. He understood that no matter what happens, it is the Savior-God to whom he could appeal and the Savior-God who brings peace.

But also know this. God did not create us to be alone and to suffer alone. God called us as believers to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2). I would ask you to express your situation to someone you trust for spiritual support. I appreciate your email to us, but you would do yourself wonders if you could interact face-to-face with a trusted friend, church member, minister, or pastor. If your dad was a professor at DTS, then I'm certain the counseling services are open and available to you. I hope this helps. Remember, God is not far from each of us (Acts 17:27). God has said that He would never leave us, nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Be encouraged that you have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the guarantee that you are God's cherished child (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). God is always there for you.

Nathan Townsie

P.S. My colleague at Probe, Sue Bohlin, also had some thoughts she wanted to share with you.

_____, many, many people have trouble feeling God's love, but they don't feel free to talk about it. There are a number of reasons for the obstacles to experiencing His love, and while I can't know the answer in your case, maybe one or more of these might resonate with you.

First, as I'm sure you know, we live in a fallen world. Nothing works right, including our "feelers." Sometimes our perceptions malfunction. Sometimes we can sense that there are feelings deep in our souls but we can't access them. Life can be like a radio with a broken antenna, unable to pick up the radio signals that are present in the room but we're unable to receive them.

Sometimes we shut our feelers down after a painful experience or trauma, believing that it just hurts too much, and we make a private vow to not feel anything. The trauma of losing your father wounded you and shaped you forever, and I am so very sorry to learn of this. Do you think it's possible you decided, years ago, to shut down your heart so you wouldn't feel the pain of loss and grief from the father-shaped hole in your heart?

The good news is that God is able to heal broken receivers, broken feelers. We need to give ourselves permission to open ourselves up to both the negative and the positive emotions that are part of life, and ask Him to bring healing to our "feelers." Many people report that when they renounced their inner vow to not feel anything, God gradually restored their ability to feel again.

Secondly, if we're angry at God, it's really hard to feel His love because the anger gets in the way. I get that—I spent the first twenty years of my life angry at God because He allowed a trauma to shape my life in painful ways. It took me some time to get to the point where I grasped the truth of His sovereignty, the fact that He is in total control, which is balanced by His goodness. If God allows something painful into

our lives, it's because He has a plan to redeem every bit of the pain. I'd love to share my story with you, "How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change" here: www.probe.org/how-to-handle-the-things-you-hate-but-cant-change/. You may also benefit from "The Value of Suffering" here: www.probe.org/the-value-of-suffering/)

Third, different people have different ways of experiencing God's love. Recently, a friend was thinking about the fact that he has trouble feeling loved by his heavenly Father because of his relationship with his earthly father. While on vacation, he wondered what it would take for him to feel God's love, and at that moment he heard the squawk of a flamingo. He turned toward the sound of the animal and smiled with pleasure, and was suddenly aware that he had been touched by an evidence of God's love through His creation. Be on the lookout for unexpected ways that God says "I love you!" I send this with a prayer that God meets you in your feeling of aloneness and assures you of His love.

Sue Bohlin

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"We Need Encouragement After Repeated Miscarriages"

Recently, my wife and I suffered our third miscarriage in a little over a year. I am feeling so many emotions right now from anger and frustration to confusion. We have no kids currently, but would like to one day. I am having trouble reconciling these miscarriages and was hoping for some encouragement I guess. Where can I look in the Bible for

something that helps?

My hurt aches for you and your wife. I am so very, very sorry for the tsunami of pain and disappointment and grief you and she are experiencing. My husband and I are also in the "Parents Who Have Lost Babies" club. Burying our daughter after nine days of life was devastating to us, but God has greatly redeemed every bit of the pain in the years since then.

I think the encouragement you seek will come from being able to see the bigger picture, one that includes God's tender love for you and His tears for your pain as He works out His purposes in your life and character. May I suggest a couple of resources that may help? My Probe article "The Value of Suffering" is intensely practical in terms of understanding a biblical view of pain and suffering: The Value of Suffering

At our last Probe Mind Games conference, where we equip students to be confident in their faith before they get to college, I recorded my teaching session on this subject, which I sensed was very much anointed by God. I pray you find it helpful and comforting: www.box.net/shared/66gn28bubc (It opens with the sound track to the video I show first, Rob Bell's NOOMA video "Rain.")

You may also find Caleb Ministries helpful; they help people who are in exactly your position.

I send this with the prayer that you and your wife experience the warmth of God's comfort wrapped around your soul like a warm blanket on a cold and rainy day.

Again, I am so sorry for your losses.

Sue Bohlin

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“I Need Help Resolving Past Stuff In My Life”

I need help resolving past stuff in my life. I’m stuck and I don’t know where to go or what to. Can you help?

I can tell you that from my study over the years, as well as personal experience, I believe the key to emotional healing (which is what resolving past stuff is about) is a two-pronged effort: grieving and forgiving. That said, the overarching, “big picture goal” is what David realized in Psalm 51:6 when He told the Lord, “I know that You desire truth in my inmost parts.” God brings freedom and healing when we allow Him to show us the lies we have believed about what we’ve experienced and the conclusions we have come to about Him, about life, about other people and about ourselves. When we renounce the lies and embrace the truth, we actually experience Jesus’ promise in John 8:32, “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.” But it needs to be more than an intellectual assent to the truth; we also need to open our hearts to the freeing power of truth.

It’s important to face our losses and our woundings, inviting Jesus into the process (absolutely essential), so that we give Him access to those places in our hearts that need healing. In fact, one of my mentors calls Christian denial “the refusal to give God access to the hurts He wants to heal for His glory and our benefit.” Instead of going digging, it’s much better to ask the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Counselor, to shine His light on which wounds and losses He wants to address, since He knows the best order for untangling our messes. As He brings memories to the surface, we ask for grace in facing them, experiencing the feelings again but this time in a

redemptive way because we are giving them to God to heal, and grieving the ungrieved feelings we haven't yet dealt with. This means tears, and sometimes screams. (The best definition I've ever heard of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, the emotional debilitation that can follow an emotional trauma such as sexual abuse, or war, or observing something horrific like the workers who cleaned up the aftermath of 9/11, is "failure to scream.") Journaling is one of the most important tools in grieving because there is something therapeutic about the layers of sensory experience in writing on paper: holding the pen, feeling the paper, smelling the ink and the paper, hearing the sounds of pen on paper. And somehow, the Holy Spirit seems to be able to direct our thoughts and our feelings in the process of writing out what's in our hearts, and He dislodges the shards and splinters of lies that are embedded in our souls so that we can recognize them, renounce them, and embrace the truth He shows us.

One of the things God has shown me about grieving is that there is a finite amount of grief for each wound and loss. He knows how many tears are attached to each wound, and once they're out of us, they are gone forever, collected by God Himself in His tear-bottle (Ps. 56:8). (Consider this: if you think about a childhood loss or painful experience that caused tears, have you cried about it lately? Probably not, because you finished grieving it years ago. There were a finite number of tears over losing a beloved pet in fourth grade, for example. And also consider that since there will be no sorrow or crying or pain in heaven for the believer (Rev. 21:4), all our grieving has a time limit.

The other part of healing is forgiving, where we face the wrongs done to us and choose to let go of them into God's hands for Him to deal with. There are good resources on understanding forgiveness and how to forgive (two of the best are *Total Forgiveness* by R.T Kendall and *I Should Forgive, But…* by Chuck Lynch), but bottom line, we forgive because the

only one we hurt by refusing to forgive is ourselves. It's like someone tosses us a hot potato, and we clutch it to our chest exclaiming with pain, all the while continuing to hold it to ourselves. Forgiving means letting go of the hot potato so it no longer hurts us. When we forgive the people who caused us pain, we release them into God's hands for HIM to deal with them as He sees fit. Louis Smedes said that when we forgive someone, we set a prisoner free, and we discover that the prisoner was us.

Refusing to forgive has terrible repercussions. Unforgiveness is a bitter, corrosive poison that consumes a person's soul and diminishes their spirit. I watched a family member grow increasingly invalid and weak with the years of holding onto grudges and insults, whether real or perceived, as if they were treasures. By the time she died, all of her life and vitality was drained out, and there was nothing but a brittle shell of who she used to be. But failing to grieve also has painful consequences: uncried tears heighten stress and cause all kinds of physical diseases and maladies. Because we are a unit of body, soul and spirit, our bodies hold onto soulish pain and it comes out as physical pain and illness. This is why James 5 "connects the dots" between physical illness, confession of sins, and the need for prayer.

Hope you find this helpful.

Sue Bohlin

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“Why Is God Allowing Me to Suffer?”

I don’t know what to think anymore. I am a Christian (or thought I was a child of God) and go to church weekly, tithe weekly and try to live my life according to God’s Word.

I was downsized by my company last June, I have gone thru my severance and my retirement money, I am losing my home and my life. I am just weeks away from being a homeless person because I will have to walk away from my home and possessions. I have applied to over 140 jobs with nothing panning out. I have a college degree and a medical certificate and was at my company for over 12 years—I am not a slouch by any means.

I just don’t know how to think about God anymore. I have talked to Him daily, confessed all known sin, studied until I am cross-eyed, I have asked daily for His help, what He wants me to learn from this, what He would like me to do for Him while I am waiting, etc. I am at a loss here and it appears He is going to allow me to be taken down and die this way. I have never been so discouraged in my life and have even considered taking it because it would end all the pain and misery. I only haven’t because I am to scared of Him to do so. So where is the loving God I have been worshipping all these years? I really don’t think I was saved after all because I don’t think He would do this to a child of His. I have seen other Christians in my community go thru job loss and He has helped them through it all and they are back to their lives, but not me. What is wrong with me that He won’t help me?

Discouraged and alone,

———

I am so very, very sorry for what you have been experiencing in this huge trial. It sounds like you are so discouraged and

hopeless that you are questioning if you are actually saved at all because God seems to be treating you differently than what you've seen with other Christians. You sound frustrated and panicky because God appears to be allowing everything to go down the drain. And who can blame you for feeling this way? I am so sorry.

It's especially hard in our culture where we tend to equate God's goodness and love with Him keeping us comfortable. So when we lose the things that have made our lives comfortable and livable, we question if God is still loving and good. And then we're open to the enemy's suggestion that God is neither loving nor good, and that He owes it to His children to keep us comfortable. Then, when we focus on a resulting sense of entitlement, it's easy to let a spirit of anger and bitterness grow inside.

You are not alone. Job had the exact same feelings and the exact same questions. And that is why I am so grateful for that book, because it provides a perspective we couldn't possibly know through our reason or our experience. When you've done everything right, when you've sought to examine yourself to see if there is any unconfessed sin, when you've prayed and submitted to God and still things don't change, there may well be a drama unfolding in the spiritual dimension that you can't possibly see right now. Satan was the source of attacks on Job, but God allowed it for His glory and for Job's ultimate benefit.

I don't know what God is doing in you, _____. But I do know that He is good, and that He loves you, and that He has a plan for these horribly difficult times in your life. Even if it entails losses you could never imagine. A hundred years from today, when you are with Him in heaven, it will make sense. This is not the end, even if it can feel like it.

I think more and more Christians will find themselves in similar situations, where we become dependent on other members

of the Body of Christ to survive difficult financial seasons in our lives. I believe this is why the Word says that it is important to stay connected to the Body in community, because community helps us with both discouragement and the isolation of aloneness. The Body of Christ is His "aloneness-fighter" for each other. And I pray you will be able to find resources for support in your church, or a church in your area that follows the Bible's pattern for taking care of each other.

I wish I had a solution for you, _____. All I know is that God is still God, and love is still driving all His dealings with you. I know that He wants to bless you and glorify Himself, even if His definition of blessing is not what you would choose right now. I send this with a prayer that you will experience His provision and His love in new and deeper ways, regardless of how He provides for you, and regardless of how He shows His love for you.

With sincere concern,

Sue Bohlin

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"My Hurting Friend Has Stopped Believing in God"

I have a friend who has had a rough couple of years. Her parents split up and she doesn't like her mom's boyfriend and she recently told me she has stopped believing in God though she has been brought up to be a Christian. She just told me and a friend all this stuff and we don't know what to say, could you please help?

I wouldn’t worry about what your friend is saying right now about not believing in God. Those are the words of a broken heart. Often when people feel God has abandoned them or betrayed them because He has allowed something bad to happen, they respond by saying, “OK, God, I’ll show you, I won’t believe in You anymore!” They don’t really mean it. . . they’re just hurting so bad they don’t know how else to respond.

If she were my friend, I would just be there for her, put an arm around her and hug her and love on her, and silently ask God to love her through me. She needs friends, she needs support, she needs to feel loved and cared for. That’s how she’ll eventually come to realize how God was loving her in her pain.

I also wouldn’t get into any arguments about God. If she says things like “Well, I don’t believe in God anymore, if God were there He wouldn’t let stuff like this happen,” I’d just nod and say, “Yeah, it really stinks what’s going on, and I don’t blame you for hurting so bad.”

Just keep in mind what her heart needs instead of what her mouth is saying. And love her, love her, love her through it. Later on you can tell her you were doing it in Jesus’ name.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

A Doctor’s Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first

met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

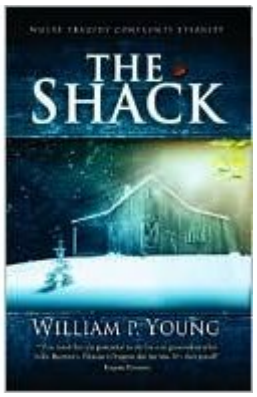
As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and youll see what I mean.

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Response to "The Shack"



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel,{1} for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read "Is *The Shack* Heresy?" by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It's a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It's signed "Papa," his wife's favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*,{2} where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character's questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of "How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?"

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don't read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn't have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my "wisdom journal," a book I've been adding to for years with wisdom from others that I didn't want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn't. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about "doing Christianity." It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

Fresh Insights

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

- God is warm and inviting
- He collects our tears in a bottle

• Jesus was not particularly handsome
• God is one, in three Persons
• The Holy Spirit is a comforter
• There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
• God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation
• God values what is given from the heart
• God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God
• God is compassionate toward the anguished question, "How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?"
• The substitutionary atonement of Christ
• The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled
• There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
• How good triumphs over evil
• The nature and purpose of the Law
• The healing nature of God's love
• Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
• God's omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
• In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as "a large, beaming, African-American woman" (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is

represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa's reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

> *"Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or 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."*
>
> *She leaned forward as if to share a secret. "To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes."*
>
> *. . . She looked at Mack intently. "Hasn't it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you've been through, you couldn't very well handle a father right now, could you?"*
>
> *He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful. (pp. 93-94)*

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack's heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of "God is our Mother" garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

Deep Ministry

On his personal website, the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to "kill our independence" (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God's love looks like. I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn't just love me, He *likes* me.

An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

> *"We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. . . 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 to us." (p. 122)*

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ."

> *"We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been*

> *so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) 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." (p. 145)*

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *serving*. God submitting to His creation? I don't think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack,* one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, "If you'll let me, I'll be the Papa you

never had.” (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God’s eyes when they meet face to face, who can’t give themselves permission to rest from their “hamster treadmill” for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ’s bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant, grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God’s heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only “Christianity from the neck up,” but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack.* Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger.* Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that “boys express affection aggressively.”

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best “take-away” of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people's hostility toward the book isn't about what it actually says, it's about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like "heresy" and "dangerous" to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it's important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife's urging, "You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God." He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young's "out of the box" theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a "slice of God," so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul's view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—"Gandalf with an attitude," as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking "What is the author using this imagery to portray?" is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the heart of El-Shaddai ("the breasted one"). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father's and the Spirit's hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul's children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn't know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

The Shack presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise

seminarian told me, “We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy.”

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people’s understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It’s a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree. In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to “be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that’s important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. “Controversies don’t bother me,” this wise believer said. “I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis, time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it.”

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals’, and it troubled me. As I prayed, “Lord, what’s up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective,” I believe He answered me: “He

doesn’t get everything right.” Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don’t know what our blind spots are and we don’t know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with “getting your theological beliefs right.” And not “getting everything right” is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this “heretical” book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is that He knows Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and He’s using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there’s something to be said for that.

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