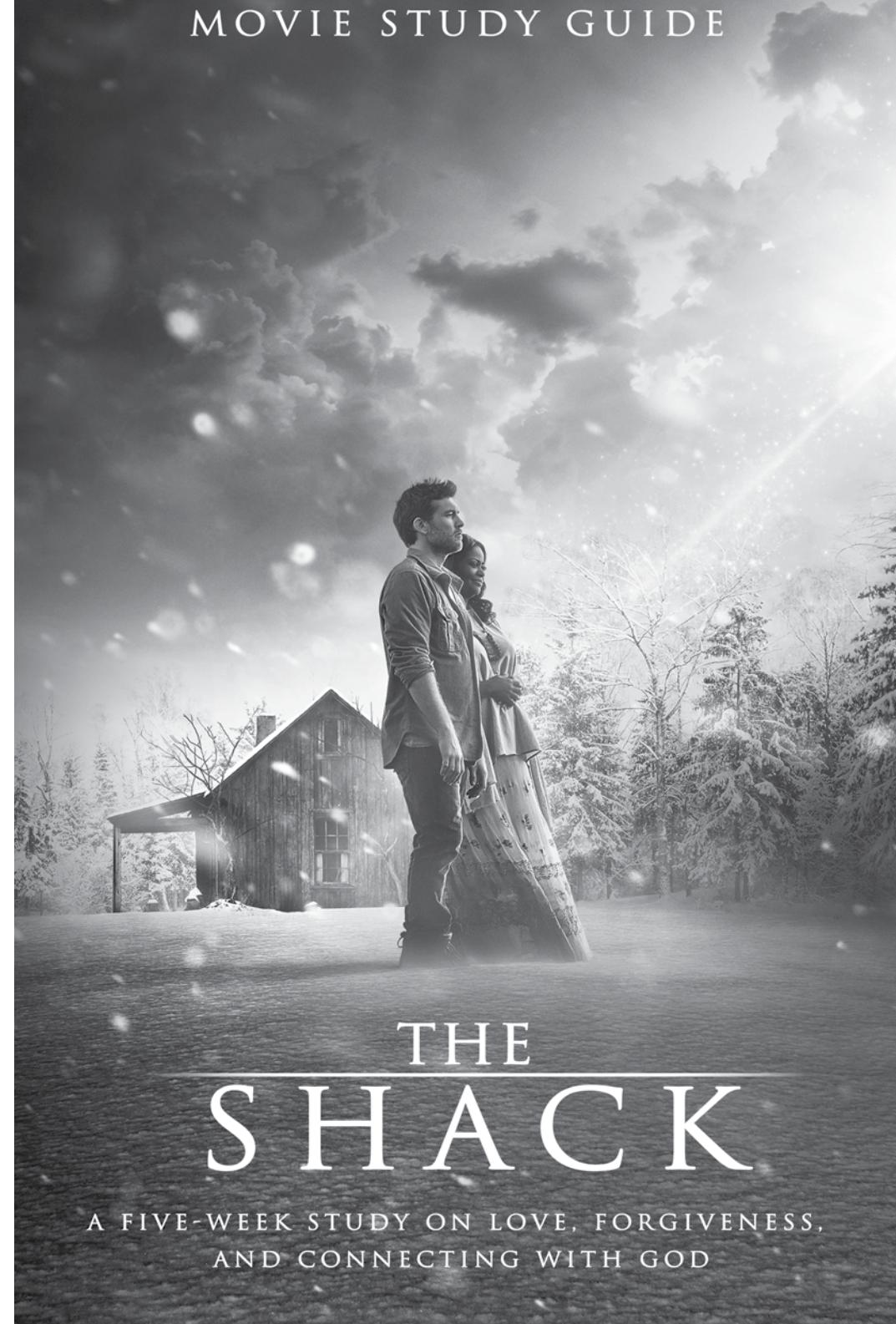


# MOVIE STUDY GUIDE



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*The Shack Study Guide*

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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *The Shack Study Guide*, your five-week guide to the biblical themes and lessons drawn from the highly anticipated feature film *The Shack*.

Based on *The New York Times* best-selling novel, *The Shack* takes us on a father's uplifting spiritual journey. After suffering a family tragedy, Mack Phillips (played by Sam Worthington) spirals into a deep depression, causing him to question his innermost beliefs. Facing a crisis of faith, he receives a mysterious letter urging him to come to an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Despite his doubts, Mack journeys to the shack and encounters an enigmatic trio of strangers—all three persons of the Trinity—led by a woman named Papa (played by Octavia Spencer). Through this meeting, Mack finds important truths that will transform his understanding of his tragedy and change his life forever.

In many ways, *The Shack* is a modern-day parable, similar to the stories Jesus told to help people better understand the truth He wanted to communicate. *The Shack* is an artistic and imaginative representation of a deeply personal story that explores encountering God's love. It raises provocative questions and points us toward the path for healing out of impossible tragedy. For all those who have wondered where God is in their

pain, for those who have questioned if God is there at all, *The Shack* presents an unforgettable encounter with a divine love that promises to never leave us.

The story of *The Shack* applies to us all, whether we have endured terrible tragedy and pain or the more common struggles of everyday life. The movie and this study guide are honest, applicable, and accessible whether you are looking for faith, have lost faith along the way, or are strong in your faith but desire to trust God more deeply. Wherever you find yourself on your spiritual journey, welcome to *The Shack Study Guide*, a place to wrestle with your questions, start a conversation, and explore the answers with God.

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## A NOTE ABOUT PAPA

One notable feature of the film that might catch viewers by surprise is the depiction of God. Papa is a woman. Jesus is a young carpenter of Middle Eastern descent. Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, is in the form of an Asian woman. These characters are not meant as literal portrayals of God or as a theological statement on the gender or race of God. Instead, they are an artistic way of presenting the different aspects of God's character in each member of the Trinity. They are creative

representations of God's transcendence and goodness. God is above and beyond all earthly limitations, and in His goodness, He desires to break down all boundaries in order to reach us with His compassion and saving grace in a way we can understand and relate to.

That's what we see Him doing with Mack. In the context of the story, Mack has rejected God in the past, but God is reaching out to him. Early in the movie, we see that Mack and his mother were abused by his alcoholic father. This naturally shapes Mack's view of God as a father and is a big part of why Mack rejects God. And as we'll hear Papa tell him, "After what you've been through, I didn't think you could handle a father right now." Papa knows what Mack needs and longs to heal him, and Papa reaches out to Mack in a representation he can relate to. It brings to mind the way Isaiah described God comforting Israel like a mother: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem" (Isaiah 66:13).

It feels a bit like Aslan, the great lion in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. On first hearing that the true king of Narnia is a lion rather than a man, one of the main characters, Susan, responds, "Ooh, I'd thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous

about meeting a lion." Her host, Mr. Beaver, replies, "Safe? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good."<sup>1</sup>

C. S. Lewis wasn't teaching that God is a lion. And *The Shack* isn't teaching that God is a woman. What we find in both are beautiful depictions of God's character and His relentless love and pursuit of each of us walking in the earthly constraints and brokenness of this human life.

God is in the business of disintegrating our assumptions and expectations and replacing them with an invitation to trust His goodness as He works in our lives. He will stop at nothing to draw us closer and demonstrate His love to us. We even see later in the film that Papa appears as a man and tells Mack that a father figure is what's needed for the challenge Mack has to face at that time. In much deeper ways than gender, God is not at all who or what Mack expected.

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 1950), 79–80.

# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Based on the movie *The Shack*, this study guide is designed to help viewers raise big questions and wrestle through them in light of God's Word. Maybe they are questions you've already had. Maybe they are questions you were afraid to ask. Using powerful scenes from the film, paired with relevant Scripture, this study is an invitation to embark on an encounter with God. Ultimately, only you can answer life's big questions for yourself. Hopefully *The Shack* and this study can offer a compelling story and guide to help frame some of those questions and open the dialogue inside.

This book is designed primarily as a five-week study guide that can be used by small groups, Sunday school classes, or Bible study groups. However, it can also be used by individuals, and it makes a great follow-up gift for visitors who attend a movie event.

The following sections are found in each of the five chapters in this book:



## FOCUS

The key verse (or verses) represents the main theme of the study and provides a way to focus on the central

message. The focus verses are an excellent opportunity for Scripture memorization if any group members choose to do so.



## WATCH

Each lesson connects to a relevant scene from the movie *The Shack*. A short Setup description sets the stage for the scene and offers a bit of background info and a brief overview. This can be helpful to read before watching the video clip.



## DISCUSS

The main course of the study, this section leads with discussion questions, raises supporting Scripture, and offers brief insights to guide group discussion and personal reflection. In a group setting, responses to the questions should open dialogue and offer greater breadth and depth of application for all.



## ABIDE

This written prayer can be the launching point for an individual's personal time of prayer. It can also be used

in a group setting. Read it aloud as a group, or use it as the beginning or end of a prayer time where group members are encouraged to speak their own prayers.



## TAKE IT WITH YOU

These final questions are meant to be explored personally and followed up during the week between small group sessions. They can provide personal reflection and a framework for journaling about what you are studying and learning.



## PRACTICE

This section offers a challenge and suggested action for application. The Message of the Week is an encouraging quote from the movie; think of it as a message from God to you. Next is a recommended hands-on, active way for each individual to respond to what they are learning and to carry the lesson into the flow of their week. Consider it a type of homework assignment for group members. Encourage your group members to share with each other what they did during the previous week, how it went, and how it impacted their journeys of trusting God.



## INFO BOXES

Throughout each lesson you will find content that is pulled out and highlighted in information boxes. These include Bible verses, quotes from the movie, quotes from the actors and actresses in the movie, and other engaging tidbits. These can be used simply as interesting supplemental information or as a launching point for further discussion, reflection, inspiration, and discovery.

LESSON 1

# WHERE IS GOD WHEN I NEED HIM THE MOST?





## FOCUS

"All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."  
—2 Corinthians 5:18–19



## WATCH

**Setup:** Following the heart-wrenching tragedy of losing his youngest daughter and the deep suffering of depression—"the Great Sadness"—that has overtaken Mack, he has finally made his way back to the epicenter of his deepest pain. But inside the shack, Mack has found a very different place than he expected. And he encounters God in ways he never dreamed.

Leading up to this scene, Mack has already met all three persons of the Trinity. And God is nothing like Mack expected. As he is still trying to make sense of it all, he enters the kitchen and begins to have his first real conversation with Papa. Papa hands Mack a mass of dough and shows him how to work it. As they

knead dough side by side, it doesn't take long to get to the root of Mack's pain.



## Watch Video 1: Where Is God?



## DISCUSS

### Don't Hold Back

Knowing how Mack got to this place and time, what are the emotions you think he's feeling? Can you relate to Mack? Why or why not?

What is the main theme of Mack's first real discussion with Papa?

"I KNOW WHAT A GREAT GULF  
THERE IS BETWEEN US. YOU  
MAY NOT BELIEVE IT, BUT I AM  
ESPECIALLY FOND OF YOU."

—PAPA

Do you think Mack is being fair in this conversation?  
Is Papa? Why or why not?

What would you say if you had a chance to talk to  
God face-to-face?

Is it okay to ask God your hardest, most troubling  
questions? Why or why not?

Have you ever done so? Did it hurt or help you? In  
what ways?

What do we do with pain? How do we handle the  
hurt? Especially when it comes from the worst this  
life on earth can offer: tragedy, injustice, abuse, dis-  
ease, you name it. You may not have experienced the  
loss of a child like Mack, but we all have painful ex-  
periences. We all feel the weight of a broken world.  
And at the heart of it all lie the questions: How can  
I know that God is good when everything feels like  
He isn't? How can I know God is there when all I  
feel is abandoned?

These are undoubtedly big questions. They are universal. They've been grappled with by experts and average Joes, so we won't come up with the ultimate be-all, end-all answer in our short discussion. But let's look at some starting points that can offer encouragement and hope.

First, God can handle our questions. We don't have to hold back with Him. He understands our emotions. He knows our thoughts and feelings whether we give voice to them or not. And He hurts with our hurts. He is with us in the pain.

David, arguably Israel's greatest king, offers us excellent examples in his psalms. He wasn't afraid to tell God exactly what he was feeling. Consider these examples:

How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face  
from me?

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts  
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long will my enemy triumph over me?  
(Psalm 13:1–2)

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, but I find no rest. (Psalm 22:1–2)

"THE REAL UNDERLYING FLAW IN  
YOUR LIFE IS THAT YOU DON'T  
THINK THAT I AM GOOD."

—PAPA

Did God get angry at David for his honest outbursts? This is how God described David much later in history and in the Bible—even after David's failures, including the Bathsheba affair and its murderous cover-up: "After removing Saul, he made David their king. God testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do'" (Acts 13:22).

Surprising? David's relationship with God was marked by honesty. It's the same kind of transparency Papa welcomes from Mack.

### God Meets Us

Why do you think Papa appears to Mack as an African American woman in their early encounters?

“DON’T EVER THINK THAT WHAT MY SON CHOSE TO DO DIDN’T COST US BOTH DEARLY.”

—PAPA

If God were to appear to you in human form, who would He be based on in your current perception of God? Who would be the most approachable and comforting persona? Who would most defy your stereotypes of God?

What personifications of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would you expect if you were in Mack’s shoes? Do the movie portrayals encourage or bother you? Why?

In the movie, how did God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit meet Mack where he was in his level of understanding and need? How did they each also challenge his perceptions and draw him into deeper relationship?

God’s love drives Him to do whatever it takes to get through to us. What an example of how God transcends earthly limitations in order to meet with us in meaningful ways when Papa takes the earthly form of an African American woman cooking in the kitchen! Because of the history of abuse in Mack’s past by his human father, Papa knows that Mack can’t handle a father figure at this point in his journey. So Papa allows Mack to encounter love and goodness in another form—one from a person in his past who offered a true example of God’s love, one that can still help convey love and acceptance to Mack.

Sure, this is a fictional portrayal. But we can draw encouragement from it that God ignores our narrow concepts of Him and intersects us in our need, driven by goodness, love, and compassion. God knows our needs, and He is willing to do what it takes to reach us there.

"THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT THIS PROJECT THAT I FEEL THE WORLD NEEDS. IT'S A BALM. IT JUST CREATED THIS CALM FOR ME IN MY LIFE, AND THERE'S JUST SO MUCH LIGHT AROUND IT."

—OCTAVIA SPENCER, WHO PLAYS PAPA

God is in the business of disintegrating our assumptions and expectations and replacing them with an invitation to encounter His love and allow Him to work in our lives. God is not hiding from us. He is pursuing us, and He will stop at nothing to draw us closer and demonstrate His love to us.

What examples do you remember from the Bible of God using various forms to represent His presence or to speak to someone? (Hint: Think burning bush, pillar of cloud and of fire, angels, a donkey.)

Was Jesus who or what the people expected of the Messiah? In what ways did He challenge or shatter their preconceived ideas?

Read and discuss the following Bible verses. How do they encourage you about encountering God?

Come near to God and he will come near to you. (James 4:8)

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matthew 7:7–8)

I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

What does it look like to believe and act upon these verses?

## **God Was There—God Is Here**

Is there something Mack is missing in his outlook about pain?

As Mack and Papa continue to talk, Papa reveals scars on her wrists. Why do they matter? What's the significance?

How does the Trinity relate to the cross? Why is it important?

"TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LORD IS GOOD; BLESSED IS THE ONE WHO TAKES REFUGE IN HIM."

—PSALM 34:8

We often look at the horror of the *what* of the cross but lose sight of the powerful *why*: the heart of God. Unfortunately, we see the penalty and the judgment and an angry God whose wrath must be appeased. And whether we admit it or not, we view Jesus as a nice God but His Dad as a God with anger management issues. We may not say it out loud, but we find ourselves feeling kind of like Mack: If salvation is found by God somehow beating up His best kid and hanging Him out to suffer on His own, why in the world would I want anything to do with the Father? It's a viewpoint that sees God as the ultimate punisher and angry judge.

We're not sure exactly what Mack believes about God, but it seems clear that he feels like God is the ultimate punisher with a terrible habit of abandoning people when they need Him most. But maybe Mack isn't seeing everything correctly. Maybe his perspective is incomplete. Maybe seeing God's Trinity as a

"I WANT TO HEAL THAT WOUND  
THAT HAS GROWN INSIDE YOU,  
AND BETWEEN US."

—PAPA

"good cop, bad cop" arrangement is wrong. Where can we find hope for a better explanation?

Deeper insight comes from the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them."

God as Trinity, as three beings in one God, is a mind-bending concept that exists outside the normal confines of our physical world. Seeing three different characters in the movie is a helpful personification, and their interplay offers many interesting, even funny, insights. But maybe what's most important for us to grasp emotionally about the Trinity is that God is a living community of love and a unified presence.

When Jesus suffered on the cross, God was there, "reconciling the world to himself in Christ." Jesus told His disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the

Father" (John 14:9). When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46), it was His human form blinded by the sin of the whole world. God was with Him.

Think of how you create a cure for a snakebite by bringing forth an anti-venom. You find a host that somehow possesses in its blood an antibody that is more powerful than the poison. When you introduce the poison into that host, an antidote can be manufactured in the process. That antidote can be given to everyone who is inflicted with the disease—it is a cure.

That is what happened on the cross. That is what Jesus, the Father, and the Holy Spirit did in the laboratory of time and space in the spirit realm of that moment. They did much more than inflict and endure punishment to satisfy some judicial decree. They produced a cure for the disease of sin.

Why? So God could heal us.

Read and discuss the following Bible verses. What hope do they offer?

As a mother comforts her child,  
so will I comfort you;  
and you will be comforted over Jerusalem. (Isaiah 66:13)

The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you

"THE LORD IS GRACIOUS AND COMPASSIONATE, SLOW TO ANGER AND RICH IN LOVE. THE LORD IS GOOD TO ALL; HE HAS COMPASSION ON ALL HE HAS MADE."

—PSALM 145:8–9

nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. (Deuteronomy 31:8)

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:26–27)



## ABIDE

*God, thank you that, at the core of your being, you are good and you show your love and goodness to us in so many ways. Please meet us in our pain and show us that you are bigger than our hurt. Please help us to trust you as we look for you through the hard moments of life. And please guide us deeper into your truth, which you promise will set us free.*



## TAKE IT WITH YOU

What great question is defining your life? How does it shape and guide your everyday thoughts, attitudes, and actions?



## PRACTICE

**Message of the Week:** “I am especially fond of you.”

**Memory Stones:** Throughout the Old Testament, we see examples of God’s people creating physical reminders of God’s love, goodness, and faithfulness. One example is the altar built by the Israelites after the waters of the Jordan River parted to allow them to cross into the Promised Land. At Joshua’s command, each of the twelve tribes took a stone from the river, and Joshua used them to build an altar to God. Joshua 4:20–24 says,

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, “In the future when your descendants ask their parents, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’ For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that

“WHEN ALL YOU SEE IS YOUR PAIN,  
YOU LOSE SIGHT OF ME.”

—PAPA

all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God.”

We are often like the Israelites—quick to forget and in need of clear reminders of God’s goodness. So this week, practice the experience of the memory stones.

Select a small stone and carry it in your pocket. Each time you feel it in your pocket or take it out to look at, repeat Papa’s message to yourself: “I am especially fond of you.”