

BASED ON THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER THAT TRANSFORMED THE LIVES OF MILLIONS

SAM
WORTHINGTON

OCTAVIA
SPENCER

TIM
AND
MCGRAW

THE SHACK

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CHURCH BOOKLET

INTRODUCTION

These free resources, provided by Damaris Media, are designed to help churches and individuals think through the issues raised in *The Shack* (in UK cinemas from 9 June 2017). In this guide you will find:

- Background information about the bestselling novel and how the film was made
- 'Film discussion' questions
- The God who surprises - Activities and questions for a small group session
- The God who suffers - Activities and questions for a small group session

Before you start, read through the guide to make sure you have everything you need. Please feel free to use the sections you think are most appropriate for your group.

See www.TheShackMovieUK.com for more about the film.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

From all appearances, Mackenzie Phillips (Sam Worthington) seems to have a good life; three great kids, a beautiful wife, lovely home - nothing seems amiss.

But, when Mack takes the kids for an overnight camping trip, what starts out as a fun getaway soon turns into a parent's most horrifying nightmare - his youngest daughter, Missy, is abducted from their campsite and her body is never recovered.

As Mack struggles to make sense of such enormous tragedy, he descends into a "great sadness" where his life starts to unravel and all the ghosts that he thought he had buried long ago resurface and push him to the edge of a precipice. It is at this time, at his darkest hour, that Mack receives a mysterious note in his mailbox with an invitation from God to meet at the shack - the place where Missy's clothing was found.

In a desperate attempt to find closure and an explanation for his daughter's murder, Mack heads back into the

Oregon wilderness to confront the killer or God... or both.

BACKGROUND

William Paul Young initially wrote *The Shack* as a Christmas present for his children. 'I wrote a story, on the train, made fifteen copies, went back to work.' This small, personal project was self-published in 2007 and went on to become a bestseller, reaching millions of people worldwide with its message of grace and forgiveness.

Stuart Hazeldine, director of the film adaptation, describes *The Shack* as 'a hit that became a phenomenon.' He jumped at the chance to be involved in the film, finding that the script 'struck a chord in me, both cinematically and from a faith perspective.' Adapting a story so loved by so many was daunting, however. 'For many people it's more than a book - it's a fresh new perspective on the enduring truths of Christian faith.'

Actress Octavia Spencer (*Hidden Figures*) faced her own challenge in making Papa, a manifestation of God the Father, a believable character. 'Playing God is a challenge, because actors are taught to bring the humanity to the character - God isn't human, so I had to wrap my brain around that. For me it was about focusing on the relationship between a parent and a son.'

Young was invited to pray for the cast and crew of *The Shack* on set before shooting started in Vancouver, British Columbia, and he feels that the finished film captures the essence of his book. 'The movie's emotional, and inspirational - and challenging too.' He wants people to come out of the cinema knowing 'that you're not alone, that forgiveness matters, that your choices matter.

That God will meet you anywhere you are. He climbs into these broken places with us, and then begins to help us create something that is living.'

The Shack is directed by Stuart Hazeldine, from a script by John Fusco, Andrew Lanham and Destin Daniel Cretton, based on the novel by William Paul Young (in collaboration with Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings). It stars Octavia Spencer, Sam Worthington and Tim McGraw.



BEFORE THE FILM

Watch the trailer for *The Shack* with your group to get them excited about your forthcoming cinema trip.

1. What is your impression of the film's characters and its story?
2. If you have read the novel *The Shack*, how do you think the film adaptation will compare?
3. What are you most looking forward to about the cinema trip?

You could share the trailer on social media to encourage others to join your trip
- see www.TheShackMovieUK.com



FILM DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to the film, and why? What were you expecting when you went in?

The first thing we all like to do when we leave the cinema is talk about the film! This is your chance to chat together as a group about your reactions to *The Shack* as a cinematic experience before digging deeper into the themes.
2. How did you react to the depiction of the place where Mack spends time with Papa, Jesus and Sarayu? If you have read the book, did this version of the shack look the way you imagined it would?

You might want to watch the trailer together to refresh your memories before you begin talking.
3. How did you feel about the music in the film, including the original songs? What did the music add to the story?
4. What sort of emotional journey did the film take you on? What emotions were you left with when the credits rolled?



ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS PART 1: THE GOD WHO SURPRISES

The Shack presents a picture of God which many people will find surprising. The film aims to challenge our perceptions of what God is like, and how he might show himself to us.

This section of the guide is designed to be used in a group meeting after watching the film. You may wish to use **part 1** and **part 2** (page 8) as consecutive small group sessions, or alternatively you could choose your preferred session.

ICEBREAKER - WHEN GOD SURPRISED ME

Ask everyone in the group to think of a time when they felt lost or frustrated in life - and found that God presented them with a surprising answer. What form did the solution take? How did God defy their expectations? What did they learn about themselves, and about God, through this experience?

If they would like to, they can share this experience with the rest of the group.

Talk about these questions together as a group

1. How was each person of the Trinity characterised in the film? What qualities did the three actors - Octavia Spencer, Aviv Alush and Sumire - bring to these roles?
2. Do you think it is significant that each person of the Trinity is portrayed in the film by a person of colour? What might make this a powerful statement?

‘Showing the Holy Trinity as people of colour is beautiful, because God made us all in his image.’
- Octavia Spencer (Papa)

3. In your view, did *The Shack*'s portrayal of God ring true with the God we meet in the Bible? What aspects of God did you feel the film conveyed most powerfully? What, if anything, would you have changed about the film's portrayal?
4. Where else, other than the Bible, do you think we get ideas about what God is like? How might our culture affect our picture of God? What about our own life experiences?

ACTIVITY: WHAT KIND OF GOD?

You'll need: Bibles

God chooses to show himself in unexpected ways throughout the Bible. Split your group into pairs, and allocate each pair one of the passages below (and/or other suitable passages of your choice).

Genesis 32:22-32

Exodus 3:1-6

1 Kings 19:11-13

Luke 2:1-7

Matthew 27:35-44

Each pair should read the passage together, discuss it together, and then share their thoughts with the rest of the group. How do they react to the picture of God in this passage - and how do the people in the passage react? Why do they think God has chosen to show himself like this, and what might it tell us about him?



5. What do you think is the most reliable way of knowing what God is really like? Which truths about God do you see as 'non-negotiable' - and in which areas are you open to changing your mind?
6. How does *The Shack* help to demonstrate God's willingness to meet us wherever we're at? Where in the Bible do we see God go to great lengths to show himself in ways that people can accept or understand? Why do you think God does this?

7. God the Father appears to Mack in the form of a woman who once showed him unconditional kindness. Who has been responsible for revealing God to you in your own life? What might God look like to you, if you were to meet God in the shack?

'I grew up with a very dysfunctional view of God: distant, white, grandfatherly, disappointed, watching from the infinite distance. I like to say, Gandalf with a bad attitude. I don't think that version of God exists.'
- William Paul Young



REFLECTION

You'll need: Notebooks or journals for the group

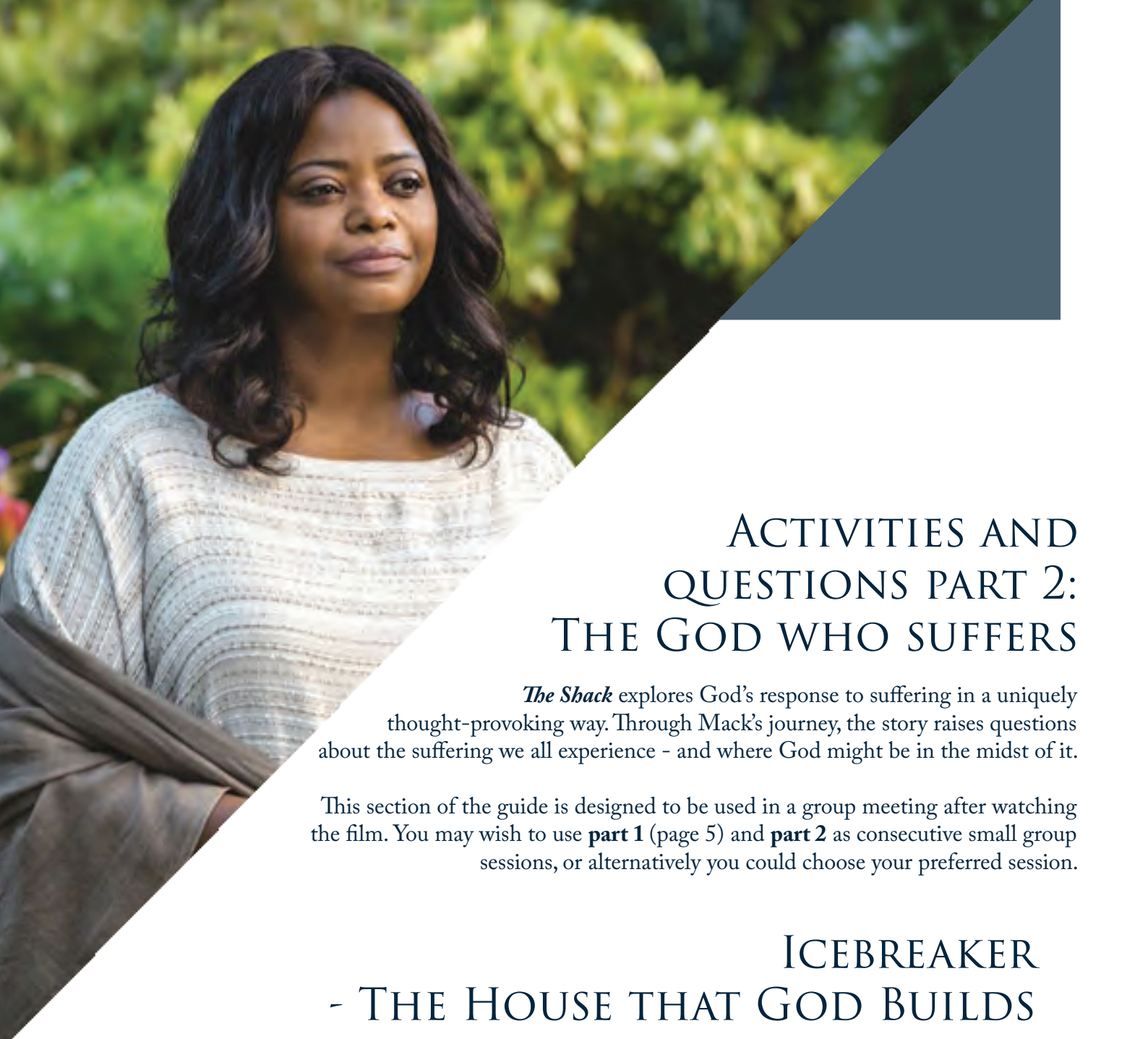
Encourage each person in the group to keep a diary in the week following your meeting. They can use this as a space for further reflection on their answers to question 7, and to make a note of any surprising ways they think God is showing himself in their daily life.

If they are able, they could also take time to thank the people who have revealed God's character to them, and shown them his kindness.

PRAYER

You may wish to sum up your meeting using the suggested prayer below, or something similar.

*Lord God, thank you for the story told in *The Shack*, and thank you for this time we've been able to spend together talking about you. Thank you that you choose to share yourself with us - and to show yourself in ways that reveal your love and grace. Help us to pay attention when you're speaking to us, even if it's not in the way we expect. And help us to be wise as we journey towards getting a clearer picture of who you really are. Amen.*



ACTIVITIES AND QUESTIONS PART 2: THE GOD WHO SUFFERS

The Shack explores God's response to suffering in a uniquely thought-provoking way. Through Mack's journey, the story raises questions about the suffering we all experience - and where God might be in the midst of it.

This section of the guide is designed to be used in a group meeting after watching the film. You may wish to use **part 1** (page 5) and **part 2** as consecutive small group sessions, or alternatively you could choose your preferred session.

ICEBREAKER - THE HOUSE THAT GOD BUILDS

Read the below quote from C.S. Lewis aloud to the group. Explain that you'll be talking about the problem of pain, and the ways in which God can bring healing and goodness from our suffering.

'Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.'

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Geoffrey Bles, 1952)

People in your group might want to briefly share what kind of 'house' they feel God is building them into, or describe a time when a difficult experience strengthened their relationship with God.

Talk about these questions together as a group

1. How has Mack been shaped by his childhood experiences, and how are these significant to the story? How has Mack's abusive father shaped his view of God, and impacted his faith as an adult?
2. How might painful experiences in our lives affect our belief in God's goodness? Have you ever experienced something which challenged your faith in this way?
3. Why do you think the creators of *The Shack* chose the shack itself as a metaphor for Mack's pain? Can you relate to the below quote from writer William Paul Young?



4. How did you react to Mack's encounter with Sophia (Alice Braga) in the cave? What perspective does this scene offer on questions of judgment and justice? In what ways do you think we are all tempted to act as judges - both of other people, and of God himself?

‘The shack is the place of devastation on the inside. It’s the place we store all of our addictions and hide our secrets, and we don’t let anyone in there.’
- William Paul Young

'Life is short and every day, every moment you can choose to live in darkness or choose to live in the light - you have the freedom to choose.'

- Aviv Alush (Jesus)

5. How do Papa, Jesus and Sarayu each help Mack to find a way through his pain? What makes each of them essential to his healing? How might their different personalities and roles reflect the way that the Trinity works in our own lives?

6. How important is forgiveness in Mack's journey? What gives him the strength to forgive his father, and Missy's killer? How can we each embrace the choice to 'live in the light', no matter what anyone has done to us?

7. What do you think is the significance of the moment when Papa shows Mack the nail-scars on her wrists? How is God portrayed in this scene, and what do you make of this perspective? How does it affect you to know that God has chosen to suffer for and with us?

You might want to consider verses such as 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 and Matthew 27:46 in your discussion.



REFLECTION

You'll need: Suitable music and facilities to play it; printouts of the Bible passages below.

Read the below quote from C.S. Lewis out loud. Then take a time of reflection, perhaps playing some music or lighting some candles to set the mood.

Ἰ γνωσῶ νοσῶ, Lord, why you utter no answer. You are yourself the answer. Before your face questions die away. What other answer would suffice? - C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Geoffrey Bles, 1956)

Encourage the group to reflect on the message of the God who is close to us in our suffering - and who offers himself to us as the answer to the problem of pain. You may wish to hand out printouts of the Bible passages below, or other suitable passages of your choice, to aid reflection.

Isaiah 43:1-4

Isaiah 53

Isaiah 65:17-25

Matthew 27:32 - 46

John 32:32-44

Romans 8:31-39

PRAYER

You may wish to sum up your meeting using the suggested prayer below, or something similar.

Lord God, we've all had experiences which have made us question your love for us. But when we see you clearly, we understand that you're not distant or uncaring. In fact, you love us enough to suffer with us and for us, in the person of your son Jesus. We may never fully understand why painful things happen to us, but we can be sure that you are good, and that you can make something good out of our messy lives. Please meet us in the midst of our pain, and bring us the healing that we need. Amen.



CREDITS

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