

Sarah Young,
*Jesus Calling:
 Enjoying Peace in
 His Presence*
 (Nashville: Thomas
 Nelson, 2004)

Some Hear His Voice, But /s Jesus Calling? | BY MARY MCINTOSH

It's unusual enough to read a devotional whose author manages to write creatively and convincingly about a faith relationship with God's Son, but it is even more unusual when she sounds like God's Son speaking to you. When a friend emailed me a selection from the devotional, *Jesus Calling*, by Sarah Young, I didn't consider her technique but only how it made me feel. The ideas were expressed so well that I told another friend it was one of the best devotional pieces I'd ever read. After I read the whole book, however, and experienced Young's very consistent style and theme, I changed my mind.

Many have found this book comforting. Young views her readers as fallen and weak human beings who can be consoled by companionship with Jesus. She emphasizes the themes of love, trust, faith, and dependence upon Jesus—an apparently biblical perspective. However, the other half of the biblical perspective—that we are sinful human beings in need of redemption, forgiveness, and discipline—is largely missing. The need for relationship with Jesus dominates the message. Reference to the accompanying need for surrender, repentance, and obedience, all essential to a dynamic and fulfilling relationship with a God-Savior, is lacking.

The devotional is further flawed in the following ways. First of all, there is a mystical direction to the work, lent to the writing by such words as "Presence" or "Light of my healing Presence," which refer to Jesus. Approaching Jesus is seen as a way of escaping or rising above the self, a goal that is the object of mysticism but not the object of the biblical personal relationship with God. Redemption is the object of the biblical relationship. If we are forgiven and redeemed from sin by our Creator and Savior, we will automatically have peace, and this peace cannot be sought or achieved in any other way: "And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever" (Isaiah 32:17).

Contrary to current popular opinion even in our own

denomination, the mystical state is separate from God, an experience or sphere other than God. It is, in fact, a substitute for an experience with God, which is why we have been warned against it by Ellen G. White and others. A full experience with God the Father, at root, must include complete surrender to the Son, Jesus Christ.

Many involved in mysticism do find a self-acclaimed peace, but it is achieved as a result of the effort and desire of the believer, usually through meditation or spiritual disciplines, which involve emptying the mind and self of material concerns and distractions to enter a transcendent sphere of reality. Testimony from those who have been there says that communication with God or Jesus is possible there as well. Communication with God, on the contrary, happens through His Word or through the Holy Spirit, and is what follows a cleansing of the soul through repentance.

David is our example of the repentant seeker in Psalm 51:2–3, 10: "Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions. . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (KJV). Young's Jesus says, "Let go . . . rest in my Presence, where you are complete" (p. 87). We cannot be "complete" in God's "Presence" without David's experience. If we come to Him a sinner without acknowledging our sin, we have no grounds for acceptance by God. An encounter with God is not achieved by "letting go" but rather by purposeful intention.

The second issue is that Jesus is a Person, not a Presence. Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. To think of Jesus as a Presence denies his personality.

Third, the author chooses to write the devotional in the first person, as if Jesus were speaking to us. Although an author can intuit through thorough Bible study what Jesus might think and say, the result will be his or her human interpretation. Sarah Young not only subjects us to her interpretation of the Bible but brings us into relationship

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with a Jesus of her own making by using the first person. She is directly indicating that Jesus himself, Creator of the universe and Savior of humanity, would say these things. Her technique causes deception.

Young may not intend to deceive us, but this is the unfortunate effect of using this rhetorical technique. In the introduction to her book, she explains that she uses this method because she's had experiences in which Jesus spoke to her. While this may be true, these experiences are at best personal and may at worst be a supernatural deception of a high order. We are told that "as the second appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ draws near, satanic agencies are moved from beneath. Satan will not only appear as a human being, but he will personate Jesus Christ, and the world that has rejected the truth will receive him as the Lord of lords and King of kings" (*Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 2nd ed., vol. 5, p. 1105).

Yet another issue is that self, not Christ, is the true focus of the devotional exercises in the book. The Christian person spoken to is one who desires peace, one who may even crave peace and stillness. Jesus says, according to Young, "I want you to live from your real Center, where my Love has an eternal grip on you" (p. 53). The quest for peace in this book is self-centered. Christ is not seen as a separate person, but as a way of rising above one's circumstances, perhaps even escaping from circumstances which may involve self and sin: "My peace is independent of all circumstances . . ." (p. 64).

Although *Jesus Calling* encourages a relationship with Jesus, it is expressed as a union with the divine, an amorphous, unnamed entity. In the biblical relationship with Jesus, the Savior, we *abide* in Jesus and Jesus in us: "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4, KJV). This relationship is clarified further when the Bible speaks of Jesus' words abiding in us: "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (verse 7). Here the seeker is encouraged to approach Jesus through His words.

Never are we encouraged in the Bible to empty our minds or deny who we are to achieve

this communion. We stay (abide) with Jesus and trust Him as He is revealed in His Word. We can assume the converted (or "born again") condition of the seeker in the John 15 passage because of the use of the preposition "in." The seeker is told not to abide "with" but to abide "in" Jesus. This relationship is a result of "receiving" Christ: "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God" (John 1:12, KJV). Now there is a two-way abiding relationship: "Abide in me, and I in you." For whomever seeks and receives God, God comes to be with him.

The outcome of this relationship is to bear fruit: "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. . . . Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples" (John 15:5, 8, KJV). The desired result of the mystical relationship with the divine is to transcend the world, to find peace and commune with God, a self-oriented goal. The goal of the biblical relationship with Christ is to glorify God. We remain separate from God even while maintaining our connection with Him through His Word and experiencing His presence through the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Godhead.

Another well-known devotional, *Streams in the Desert*, also emphasizes the need for stillness when seeking God, but with a significant difference from *Jesus Calling*: "Once the stillness came, once your hand refrained from knocking on the iron gate, and once concern for other lives broke through the tragedy of your own life, the long-awaited reply appeared" (p. 33). God's voice is "heard" when self-seeking ceases and the attention shifts to others, the "fruit" of glorifying God. This is the message of the biblical Jesus, but it is not the message of the Jesus in *Jesus Calling*. ■

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