

## Shalom

### Shalom: God's Vision for the world

Peace Catalyst International's founder and former president Rick Love said, "The Church should be a place where people study, practice and proclaim peace... We preach of peace, we work towards peace, and we imitate the Prince of Peace."<sup>1</sup> Love wrote and spoke about this "missing peace" in the Church's theology and missiology, emphasizing the need, challenge, and opportunity for the Church to recapture God's vision for peace and form Christians for peace work. The Bible describes this peace as relationships restored and reconciled; people experiencing well-being, justice, and abundant flourishing; and God, people, and all of creation interconnected in beautiful harmony. This God-sized vision for the world is captured by the Hebrew word and rich Biblical concept of *shalom*, often translated simply as peace.

### Negative Peace and Positive Peace

"The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance on you, and give you peace (*shalom*)."

-Numbers 6:24-26

This common blessing is often heard in both Christian and Jewish services. God's people throughout the Bible hope, long, and pray for peace. People today do the same.

For most of us, we have a small idea or vague notion of the peace we want in our lives and its tangible manifestation. We have a longing to see "peace" realized, yet an incomplete understanding of how this longing for peace could look when manifested in our world, or how it might become a reality. Consequently, we often conceptualize peace as a lack of conflict. If we're not fighting, not upset, not experiencing strong emotions, or not disagreeing about something, then we have "peace." We might think about peace as inner calm or tranquility, as agreeing to disagree, or avoiding difficult topics for the sake of "unity" in our relationships. Sometimes, "peace" simply means that there is no physical violence.

Peacebuilders often refer to this type of peace as "negative peace" because it means that something undesirable is not happening (e.g. the violence has stopped, the

emotional attacks ended, another person is not bothering us, etc.). “Negative peace” is often superficial and short-term. While “negative peace” might be a good beginning, it does not necessarily lead to a deeper, sustainable peace and well-being.

Alternatively, “positive peace” provides a more expansive vision: the restoration of relationships, the creation of relational patterns or social systems that serve the needs of everyone, the constructive resolution of conflicts, and more. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about this positive peace: “Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force — war, tensions, confusion but it is the presence of some positive force — justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup> Positive peace is difficult to obtain but inspiring in scope, challenging us to imagine restored relationships on the other side of conflict and pain. “Positive peace” gets us closer to the Bible’s vision of shalom.

## Shalom Explored

“God created every blessing that could ever be imagined or would ever be created; they lay like a huge pile of treasure. God needed a container, a bag, a box or a jar in which to put them, but could find nothing - so God created shalom.”

- Jewish rabbinic legend<sup>3</sup>

Although shalom is typically translated into English as “peace,” Randy Woodley asserts that “peace” is only an adequate translation of shalom “if you consider it correct to call the Grand Canyon ‘a large crack in the ground’ or the Pacific Ocean ‘a large pool of water.’”<sup>4</sup> Shalom is so much more than just “peace.” God’s peace “surpasses understanding” so we approach shalom with humility because it’s bigger, wider, and deeper than we can fully grasp.<sup>5</sup>

The biblical story demonstrates the dynamic meaning of shalom through the multifaceted ways the word is used throughout the Hebrew text, for example to indicate greetings, well-being, health, safety, prosperity, trust, friendship, and internal, interpersonal, and collective peace.<sup>6</sup> Biblical scholars consider the concept to be connected to individual and collective wholeness or well-being that includes the material (prosperity), relational (justice), and moral (integrity), culminating with an eschatological vision of the Prince of Peace reigning over God’s kingdom of peace.<sup>7</sup> In

short, shalom is ultimately characterized by interconnected harmony within and between individuals, groups, all of creation, and God, where justice, flourishing, and right relationships are woven together.

Faith leaders and scholars describe shalom in similar ways:

- “The Hebrew word often translated as ‘peace’ in the Bible, shalom is God’s dream for the world as it should be: whole, vibrant, flourishing, unified, and yes, at peace. Shalom is God’s dream for his love to bring wholeness and goodness to the world and everything within it, including you and me.” - Osheta Moore<sup>8</sup>
- “Shalom is what the Kingdom of God smells like. It’s what the Kingdom looks like and what Jesus requires of the Kingdom’s citizens.” - Lisa Sharon Harper<sup>9</sup>
- Shalom is a “persistent vision of joy, well-being, harmony, and prosperity,” a vision with “many dimensions and subtle nuances: love, loyalty, grace, salvation, justice, blessing, righteousness.” Shalom is “the freight of a dream of God that resists all our tendencies to division, hostility, fear, drivenness, and misery.” - Walter Brueggemann<sup>10</sup>
- “There is no shalom without justice. But shalom goes beyond justice. Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships: with God, with self, with fellows, with nature.” - Nicholas Wolterstorff<sup>11</sup>

Shalom is loaded with meaning and power because it flows from God’s own character and is the essence of God’s kingdom that Jesus announced and incarnated. In addition to Jesus’s title “Prince of Peace,”<sup>12</sup> God is repeatedly called “God of peace” throughout the New Testament.<sup>13</sup> Appropriately then, throughout the gospels and in Paul’s letters, the good news of God’s kingdom or reign is announced alongside actions to restore personal, relational, and communal shalom.<sup>14</sup>

When we catch a glimpse of the multifaceted nature of Biblical shalom, we are holding a hermeneutical key which helps us understand the Biblical narrative of God’s comprehensive action of redemption. In the beginning, the goodness of God’s creation was marked by physical, material, and spiritual well-being, or wholeness. Then God established one family as a channel of blessing to all. Yet even as shalom was repeatedly broken, God promised a coming covenant of shalom,<sup>15</sup> a promise fulfilled by Jesus’s inauguration of the hoped-for Messianic kingdom of shalom. From the beginning to the end of the Biblical narrative, we see God’s work for and toward

shalom, prophetic corrections when God's people work against it, Jesus's announcement of the kingdom of God marked by shalom, and an ongoing invitation to follow God toward and into this vision of wholeness, justice, and right-relatedness to God's self, one another, and the creation around us.

In short, shalom is the hermeneutical key unlocking how we understand God's work in the biblical story: God is the God of peace, the source of shalom, and the one working to establish shalom from beginning to end. Jesus assumes the role of Messianic King in ways that surprise Jewish expectations, proclaiming and enacting the shalom of God's reign, confronting injustice and oppression, healing harms, and restoring all that is broken. Jesus calls all who would follow him to participate in his shalom work as first fruits for his already but not-yet kingdom.

### **A Shalom Vision**

The Bible includes numerous spectacular passages describing God's shalom realized, when God's will for mercy, justice, and flourishing for all has renewed the world.<sup>16</sup> This shalom is reflected through biblical imagery of the kingdom of God,<sup>17</sup> the city of God,<sup>18</sup> and a garden with bountiful provision for all creatures.<sup>19</sup> This comprehensive renewal and redemption is nothing less than the result of God's ultimate and all-encompassing salvation.<sup>20</sup> Throughout history, God has corrected injustice and had mercy on those in need, providing salvation by liberating people from slavery and oppression, disease and poverty, and the spiritual forces that harm, divide, and dehumanize.

Christians recognize that the gift of God's salvific, liberating action has occurred, continues to happen, and will reach its culmination when God makes all things new. God saved when Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated God's reign through his life, death, and resurrection; God continues to save today as he draws people into Jesus's way of shalom, becoming first-fruits of God's ongoing salvific work; and God will ultimately complete this salvific work when God's shalom is ultimately established within, between, and over all things.

God's salvation and shalom are gifts to us, yet these gifts also bring the responsibility of maintaining shalom by living according to God's will that all will flourish together. We experience shalom when people live in relationship with God, each other, and all creation; when we practice love, mercy, and compassion toward all; and when we act

with integrity and justice, especially lifting up the needs, dignity, and freedom of the poor and marginalized. This collective responsibility epitomizes the “now and not yet”—shalom is something we can see in the future yet never fully reach, the distant horizon toward which God invites us to journey alongside.

### Shalom in Practice

Jesus calls us to follow him toward God’s holistic shalom now. Although God’s shalom is on the horizon, this ultimate peace and wholeness isn’t describing an ethereal, theoretical, or otherworldly state - it is something we can grasp here, now, grounded in the earthiness of daily life. This is why when Jesus asks us to follow him, we do so not to be rescued out of this world, but to join Jesus in participating in God’s restoration of shalom starting right here, right now. It’s like wearing a set of bifocals - we can see both God’s ultimate plan for all creation in the distance, yet also Jesus’s invitation for us to follow him tangibly here and now. These “shalom bifocals” provide us with clarity about how we might shape our lives, relationships, and work around and toward shalom in the present moment.

Shalom provides a framework to see how God wants to heal and restore all relationships: with God, self, one another, and all of creation. However, we experience and see broken relationships all around us, with our own selves (guilt, shame, pride, savior-complexes, etc.), others (both with individuals and groups, including systems), God’s creation (how we steward it, such as through work), and God.

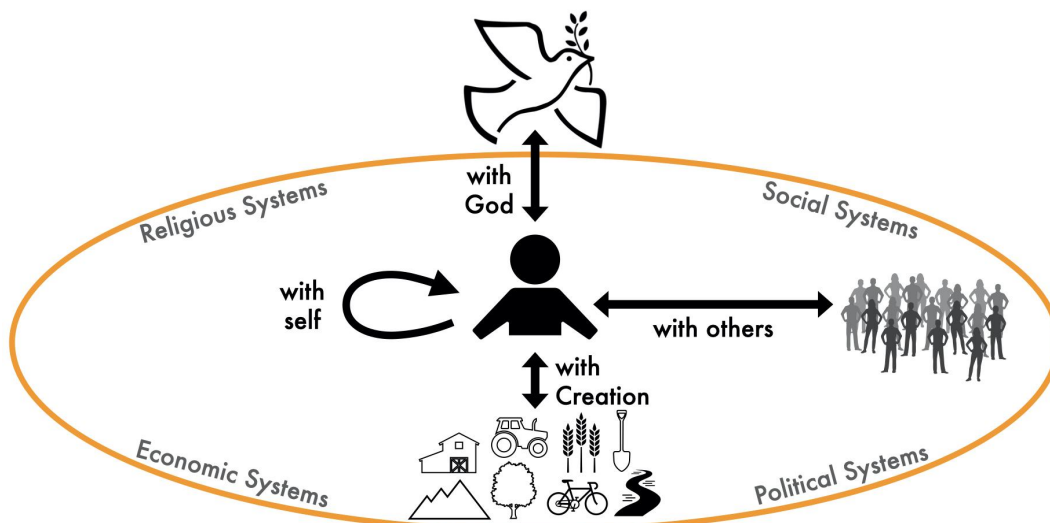


Figure 1. Relational dimensions of shalom<sup>21</sup>

Understanding this biblical vision of shalom helps us become attentive to all of our relationships so that we can be aware of our own needs and invite people to help us restore broken areas of our own lives. Shalom also allows us to be attentive to the needs of others with whom we are in community, seeing them as whole people with a web of relationships, needs, and hopes. This framework helps us to care for one another's wounds and act as healers and shalom-builders in one another's lives, whether to heal conceptions of God and self, to care for and steward God's good creation, or to love neighbor and enemy in the present. Yet shalom takes us beyond care and restoration in our individual relationships—God's vision of reconciliation also applies to our collective relationships with each other and with creation. Just as God liberated oppressed Israel from Egypt, just as the prophets challenged kings and priests who took advantage of the poor and alien, so too are we called to confront the systems and cultures of violence, domination, and oppression that ultimately harm us all.

Our role is to be ambassadors of Christ, shalom-makers known as children of God, and ministers of reconciliation.<sup>22</sup> Long-time peace practitioner John Paul Lederach references 2 Cor. 5:18-20, which describes God's work of reconciliation — a ministry given to us. He writes, "True atonement and holiness place us in the journey to make real the reconciling love of God in our lives and to heal our broken communities across the globe. Our mission is to walk the path by which all things come together."<sup>23</sup> Shalom clarifies the path in front of us informing how we shape our lives, relationships, and work around shalom in the present.

This biblical concept of shalom is how Peace Catalyst International understands God's work in the world: God is the God of peace, the source of shalom, and the one working to establish shalom. Although we each have this longing for a real positive peace, it is shalom that acts as a hermeneutical key to understand the Biblical narrative of God's comprehensive action of redemption and Jesus's kingdom announcement; it is shalom that provides us with the eschatological vision toward which we move; and it is shalom that clarifies our way forward. When we follow Jesus and live aligned to his ways, we move toward shalom personally and participate in God's work to make shalom real in our communities.

**Recommended Books:**

- W Brueggemann, *Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes* (Chalice Press, 2001)
- Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace* (Life & Faith Press, 1987)
- Osheta Moore, *Shalom Sistas: Living Wholeheartedly in a Broken World* (Herald Press, 2017)
- Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right* (WaterBrook, 2016)
- Randy Woodley, *Shalom & The Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Eerdmans, 2012)
- Perry B. Yoder & Willard M. Swartley (Eds), *The Meaning of Peace*, 2nd Ed (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2001)
- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983)
- Willard Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006)
- John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999)
- Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart, *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World* (IVP Books, 2017)

**Notes and References:**

1. Rick Love, "[The Missing Peace of Evangelical Missiology: Peacemaking and Respectful Witness.](#)" conference presentation and paper at Christian Theology and Islam, Sponsored by the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology June 9-11, 2008, Baltimore, Maryland, 15.
2. King, Martin Luther, Jr., "[When Peace Becomes Obnoxious.](#)" sermon, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery AL, March 18, 1956.
3. Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace: A Spiritual Manifesto from a Jesus Perspective* (Circle Books, 2012), 53. Moules also references how major late antiquity rabbinic texts declare "'Gadol hashalom' - peace (shalom) is the highest of values."
4. Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision* (Eerdmans, 2012), 10. Woodley references Terry McGonigal, "*If You Only Knew What Would Bring Peace*": *Shalom Theology as the Biblical Foundation for Diversity* (Unpublished, 2010), 2.
5. Philippians 4:7

6. For example, see Gen 37:4, Exodus 18:23; Leviticus 26:6; 1 Samuel 17:18; 1 Kings 5:12; 2 Chronicles 34:28; Psalm 38:3; 41:9; 55:18; 73:3; Isaiah 9:6-7; 26:3; Jeremiah 29:7,11; 38:22; Ezekiel 37:26; and many more.
7. Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice & Peace* (Life & Faith Press, 1987), 10-16.
8. Osheta Moore, *Shalom Sistas* (Herald Press, 2017), 30.
9. Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel* (WaterBrook, 2016), 14.
10. Walter Brueggemann, *Living Toward a Vision: Biblical Reflections on Shalom* (New York: United Church Pres, 1984), 15-16.
11. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 69.
12. Isaiah 9:6
13. Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 1Timothy 5:23; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 13:20
14. For example, Jesus's very first sermon in Luke 4:16-19. See also Mt 4:23; 9:35; 10:7-8; 11:5; Luke 4:40-43; 7:22; 8:1-2; 9:11; 10:9; Romans 14:17; 1 Cor. 4:20.
15. Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26; Malachi 2:5; Isaiah. 54:10; cf. Hebrews 13:20
16. See Isaiah 11:6-9; 54:10-14; 65: 17-19; 24-25; Zechariah 8:4-5
17. Psalm 45:6; Isaiah 9:6-7; 32:1; Daniel 2:44; cf. Mark 1:15 and Revelation 12:10
18. Psalm 46:4-5; 48:1-3; Hebrews 11:10, 16; 13:14; Revelation. 21:2
19. Genesis 2:8; 3:8; Isaiah 51:3; 58:11; 65:21; Jeremiah 31:12; Ezekiel 36:35; Amos 9:14, Luke 13:19
20. We're indebted to Anvil Trust for the clear connection between shalom and "full salvation." See Anvil Trust, Workshop: "[Shalom, Peace & Wholeness.](#)" 14.
21. Adapted from Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts* (Moody Publishers, 2014), 54, 58.
22. 2 Cor 5:18-20; Matt 5:9
23. John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Herald Press, 1999), 165-166.