

Shalom in the Biblical Narrative

The biblical concept of *shalom* shapes 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. The arc of the Bible is long and complex, but we believe that it bends toward the just peace of God's shalom. Shalom characterizes the wholeness and mutual flourishing of God's creation, clarifies the work of God throughout the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, is visibly enacted in Jesus' life and proclamation of God's reign, and provides us with a trajectory toward which God calls us as we follow Jesus and join in God's shalom-building mission now.

Shalom in the Hebrew Bible

Creation: A Picture of Shalom. At the very beginning of the biblical narrative, we are given a vision of shalom. The creation story depicts God's will and purpose for the entire created order: a lush, vibrant, bountiful ecosystem of plants, animals, and people existing in harmony with each other and with God. "By proclaiming that everything is good, right, in order, and as it should be, God sets the state of earthly normalcy. 'Good' becomes the once-and-for-all standard of life on earth."¹

The creation story provides our first glimpse of "God's preferred order of existence"² and serves as an anchoring image to help us understand shalom. The way the sky, land, sea, animals, vegetation, humans, and God interact and cooperate is good. "Every creature is bound to every other creature in a great community and communion of being."³ This interrelatedness and mutual flourishing is an integral component and fundamental expression of what God's ultimate vision of the world is - shalom. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann even describes the indwelling of God as central to creation theology: "the whole creation [is] the house of God" which can be described in terms of "reconciliation, peace, and a viable symbiosis."⁴ Toward this end, humans are charged with stewarding and promoting the interconnected flourishing of God's shalom, a "rule of peace."⁵

Sin and Covenant: God's Healing Strategy to Restore Shalom. The Bible depicts sin as a power that binds people both personally in our thoughts and actions as well as in our communal structures and intergroup relationships, which has inherent destructive consequences and from which we need to be liberated and healed.⁶ As we know all

too well, sin disrupted God's shalom, destroying harmonious relationships within people as Adam and Eve experienced shame and guilt, between people and God, and ultimately in families, communities, cities, between people groups, and even in God's good creation.⁷ Despite this, God did not give up on the vision of reconciliation and wholeness. Instead, God called Abraham and covenanted with him, delegating him as a channel of God's blessing not just to the Israelites, but to the whole world. Dr. Ted Grimsrud writes, "In response to the brokenness of creation, God seeks patiently to heal... [God's healing strategy] is summarized in the words to Abraham: 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'"⁸ Throughout the Bible, we see God following the same pattern: making covenants with and blessing individuals and groups that they might overflow as a source of blessing, healing, and liberation for others.⁹ God initiates covenantal relationships with people to heal the effects of sin, free people from its bondage, and restore that which had been broken, all as part of God's larger healing strategy to establish shalom over all creation.¹⁰

Exodus: Liberation & Salvation Toward Shalom. In the Exodus narrative, God liberates the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and Israel's identity and life come to revolve around this victorious act of liberation. Professor of Old Testament Perry Yoder describes the Exodus this way: "God's salvation of Israel from slavery is an expression of God's justice; it helped those in need, corrected injustice, and thus brought shalom."¹¹ Furthermore, for the Israelites and throughout the Hebrew Bible, Yoder asserts that "salvation was primarily a political, material term since save refers to the liberation of people from physical and political oppression and from conditions of material distress like droughts and famine."¹² For this reason, Yoder suggests that a better translation for the word we read as "salvation" would be "liberation." God's salvation is *liberation* from all that harms us and disrupts God's shalom. In the Exodus story, God heard Israel's cries, remembered the covenant with Abraham, and liberated the Israelites from Egypt's oppression, destroying the structures that bound them. God's liberation served as a reminder to the Israelites of God's nature and will to act for justice and to create order for the sake of flourishing, with a particular bent toward lifting up and empowering the poor and the marginalized and judging the oppressors.¹³ Out of unmerited compassion and grace, God worked to restore their shalom.

The Kingship: A Covenant for Shalom. After the liberation-salvation of the people of Israel, God made a covenant with the Israelites, in which God would be faithful to

Israel and act with love, grace, and justice toward Israel. Israel would live united as a people in covenant with God both by worshiping God alone and by acting with justice and righteousness toward one another, especially the poor, marginalized, and foreigner. In fact, worshiping God rightly and acting with justice and righteousness are two practices often linked in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁴ If the Israelites stayed faithful to the covenant, they would experience God's shalom and embody it both within their community and for the world.

Writing about how the Israelites were called to enact shalom within their community, Walter Brueggemann describes shalom as a covenantal relationship among at least three elements of society: 1) those in power who order society for the good of all by sharing power, doing justice, and lifting up those on the margins, 2) those with vision (i.e. prophets) who call those with power to work and rule justly according to God's will, and 3) those excluded and marginalized who hope for and participate in their liberation and empowerment (e.g. widows like Ruth, orphans, sinners, foreigners, and outcasts).¹⁵ Israel was called to develop rhythms of redemption – habits of justice and restoration – that ensured fairness, stewardship, and liberation, undergirded by the conviction that God was the rightful owner of all that the Israelites possessed.¹⁶ For example, Leviticus 25 introduces concepts such as the sabbath year or sabbath of the land, the jubilee year, and forgiveness of debt.¹⁷ As Israel was being formed into a particular kind of people, their spiritual formation necessitated a real-world, profoundly tangible expression of faith — an expression whose aim was shalom.

Jewish Messianic Expectations: A King who Rules with Shalom. During the decline and eventual exile of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, messianic expectations grew of a king who would come and establish God's reign of shalom, when God's will for mercy, justice, and flourishing for their people would be realized.¹⁸ Israel's prophets had repeatedly called its leaders to repent and order society in ways that do justice and lift up those on the margins, particularly the poor, widow, and foreigner. For example, throughout the book of Amos, the prophet spoke against the disparity between Israel's very wealthy and very poor, repeatedly calling for social justice in order to avert God's righteous judgment.¹⁹ Yet throughout the prophets, there were also repeated promises of a righteous leader who would establish God's peace. Isaiah repeatedly connected God's promises of salvation to the work of justice, caring for the poor, hungry, naked, and dispossessed, often centering the work of God's righteous

servant leader.²⁰ “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations... In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth.”²¹ The prophet Micah depicted this leader as a shepherd who provides security and “will be our peace.”²² Jeremiah depicted this descendant of David as “a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land.”²³ And Ezekiel described this leader as the servant, shepherd, and descendant of David who provides security and presides over God’s “covenant of peace” with the people.²⁴ Israel longed for and expected God to make things right through the reign of a faithful and righteous leader, whose purpose was establishing and maintaining God’s shalom in a world where it is constantly at risk of being broken.

Shalom in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the Greek word *eirēnē* picks up and expands on the Hebraic concept of shalom. Biblical scholars point out that in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), the Greek word *eirēnē* (peace) is almost always used to translate the Hebrew word shalom. Werner Foerster states that the content of the Hebrew word would have penetrated the Greek *eirēnē* and filled out its meaning for the early Christian community.²⁵ Erich Dinker similarly writes that in spite of other Greek notions of peace, we best understand New Testament *eirēnē*-peace based on our understanding of shalom.²⁶

Jesus’s Life and Ministry: A King who Brings Shalom.

For to us a child is born...And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace (Shalom)**. Of the greatness of his **government and peace (shalom)** there will be no end.

-Isaiah 9:6-7a

Isaiah 9 is one of the clearest examples of the Jewish Messianic hope, connecting concepts of God’s shalom-peace, God’s government or rule, and a host of titles for the king of Israel.²⁷ The New Testament authors build on this Jewish messianic expectation²⁸ and depict Jesus as the king who would establish God’s shalom, which Gabriel declared to Mary and angels announced to shepherds at Jesus’ birth.²⁹ However, the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and the shalom he enacted were surprising

even to his early followers. Rather than reigning over and against their Roman oppressors and other Gentiles, the gospel authors depict Jesus as a kingdom-announcing and shalom-embodying leader going beyond the ethnic, religious, and nationalistic categories of the day to enact God's reign in unexpectedly inclusive ways.³⁰

Jesus launched his public ministry by repeatedly announcing "the good news of the kingdom,"³¹ and in Luke's gospel, he declared that God's spirit set him apart to proclaim and enact God's vision which was characterized by the concepts of shalom we have explored thus far (freedom, justice, and right relationships):

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

-Luke 4:18-19, cf. Isaiah 61:1-2a

Jesus notably cut his reading of Isaiah 61 short, leaving out God's judgment and vengeance toward outsiders, which were themes of central importance in the popular understandings around the time of Jesus.³² When Jesus then shared two stories of the remarkable faith of non-Jewish enemies, his hometown audience clearly thought he had crossed a line and as a result tried to kill him.³³ Jesus was making clear that the good news of restoration and freedom had no geographic or ethnic boundaries; God's plan for restoring shalom went beyond their religious and nationalistic categories.

But Jesus' alternative vision for and proclamation of God's kingdom did not stop with his Luke 4 inauguration. Throughout his ministry, Jesus both proclaimed and enacted this restorative, inclusive kingdom-shalom vision as he healed people, rebuked unjust leadership, freed people from demonic oppression, and dined with the marginalized and outcast. Everyone was welcome at the kingdom banquet, from tax collectors, zealots, and sinners to repentant power-holders like Zacchaeus, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea.³⁴ Where sin had broken relationships between people, God, others, and creation, Jesus restored and healed them.

In the same way, Jesus sent his followers out to proclaim the good news. When commissioning his disciples and later the seventy-two to go ahead of him, Jesus told

his followers to announce the arrival of God's kingdom. This kingdom declaration was accompanied by both the proclamation and enactment of God's *shalom*: Jesus told them to first say, "Shalom to this house," then for them to "heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.'"³⁵

Holy Week and Jesus's death and resurrection stand as the climax of God's liberating and healing work, inaugurating God's reign of shalom. From the beginning of Holy Week when Jesus lamented, "If only you knew the things that make for peace," to the end of the week when Jesus declared, "Peace be with you," Jesus demonstrated practices of peacebuilding by lamenting, confronting injustice, calling out oppressors, and contending for God's shalom.³⁶ Although no short paragraph can capture the magnitude nor mystery of what happened on the cross, Jesus's death and resurrection are central to God's healing and liberating work to restore shalom, consistent with God's mission through the biblical narrative and the life and teaching of Jesus while he lived. Jesus simultaneously provided us with a definitive revelation of God as self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love, a revelation which in and of itself is liberative; and he won a decisive victory over the powers of sin and death, thus liberating us from our bondage to sin and fear.³⁷ "[Jesus] too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."³⁸ Jesus's death and resurrection were thus liberative (salvific) in order to make things right, heal our conceptions of God, and free us from bondage to fear and sin so that we might live as first fruits of God's kingdom – a restored community experiencing and embodying God's shalom.³⁹

The Early Church: A Community to Embody God's Shalom. The New Testament community continued and expanded the Hebrew Bible's vision of shalom (now *eirēnē* in Greek), understanding God's peace as including both physical and spiritual liberation and wellbeing, in both the personal and social realms. For example, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul described Jesus reigning as king and wrote that Jesus himself "is our peace," which can be understood both personally and socially.⁴⁰ Yet Paul went further, characterizing Jesus's work as breaking down divisions and reconciling people groups both to one another and to God: "His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."⁴¹ With the holistic

reconciliation both between people and with God as his ultimate framework and goal, Paul continued to work out the ethics of what it would mean to follow Jesus as part of the early Christian community – ethics shaped around and toward shalom/eirēnē:

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

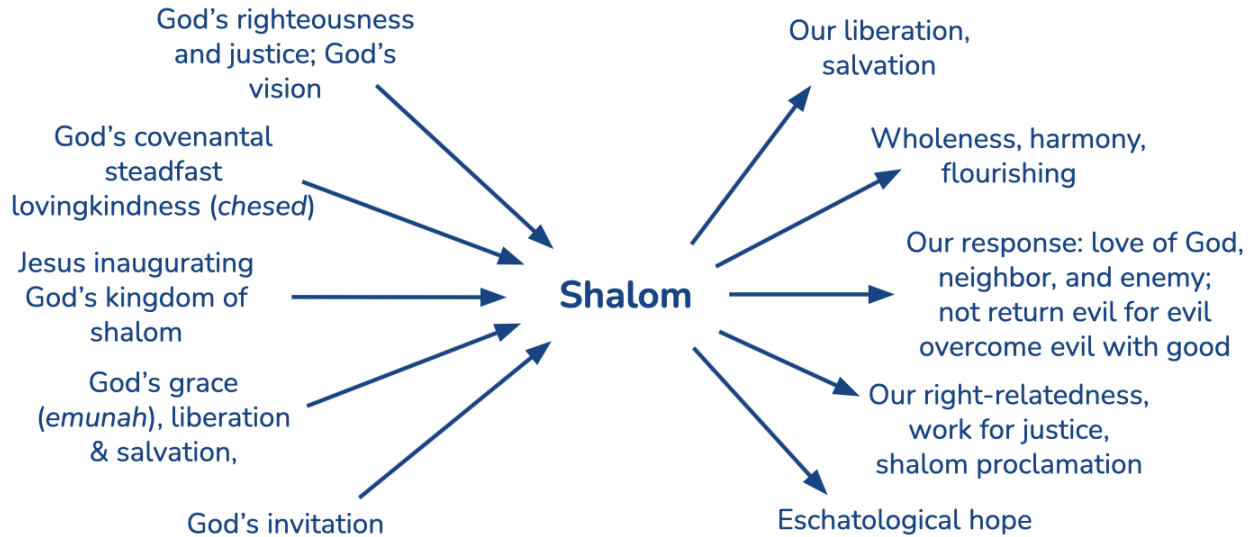
-Romans 12:9-21

Becoming Part of the Biblical Narrative

We believe that the arc of the biblical story bends toward God’s shalom, a just peace that God always intended and desired, and toward which God continues to work and invite us as co-laborers. God’s salvific and liberative work makes possible the relational flourishing of God’s shalom, and we’re called to partner with God as we humbly work out this salvation in our lives and communities.⁴²

N.T. Wright describes the Bible as an unfinished five-act play: “(1) Creation; (2) Fall; (3) Israel; (4) Jesus. The New Testament would then form the first scene in the fifth act, giving hints as well (Rom 8; 1 Cor 15; parts of the Apocalypse) of how the play is supposed to end.”⁴³ In this metaphor, we are part of the existing story, “offering something between an improvisation and an actual performance of the final act.”⁴⁴ Understood in this way, the Bible tells the story of God’s original shalom ideal (“Creation”), the rupture of God’s shalom (“Fall”), God’s efforts to begin to heal the world through one particular family and nation (“Israel”), God’s direct action in Jesus to inaugurate the reign of God and establish shalom (“Jesus”), and our final act when we are called by God to follow Jesus in God’s shalom-building mission.

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Adapted from Willard M. Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, pp 30, 41.

In the diagram above, we see how the concept of shalom weaves the various stories and central themes of the Bible into one comprehensive story arc, and as the Bible makes clear, our “fifth-act” response is complex and difficult. Shalom is always under threat, and so our work to train, prepare, and build relationships and structures for the positive just peace of God’s shalom is demanding. Following Brueggemann’s logic about shalom as a covenant both between God and three elements of society (i.e. those with power, those with vision, and those pushed to the margins), we are called to follow Jesus in the work of shalom-building no matter what our social location. Whether we are in positions of power, calling power-holders toward God’s vision of shalom, or excluded and marginalized, Jesus invites us to live toward the vision of shalom, share and leverage our power and agency, and work for the flourishing just peace of all.

In order for us to become part of God’s biblical shalom-building mission, shalom must be the defining element of our lived-out faith: it must shape the nature of our Christian hope and vision, discipleship, everyday relationships, proclamation and witness, and social and political work. Shalom provides a clear biblical vision of the direction in which Jesus is leading us and a firm hope that motivates our everyday work and characterizes our everyday relationships. As Jesus’ ambassadors of reconciliation,⁴⁵ we give voice to this shalom vision and call everyone toward it, understanding that we are all connected and interrelated, living in covenantal relationship with each other and

God, and striving to live as a restorative, transformative community with and for all. We act with grace, mercy, and compassion – *agape* love – toward all. Shalom challenges us to pursue justice, resist oppression, and participate in God’s ongoing work of liberation more widely in society by dismantling systems of oppression and resisting oppressive spiritual forces of evil – racism, patriarchy, greed, etc. – rooting them out, healing our own souls, and challenging their power over society and culture. The biblical story shows us what it looks like to follow Jesus as part of God’s shalom-building mission: “for us, to be a shalom maker is to act from love through justice to liberate those in bondage since only through liberation can shalom be experienced.”⁴⁶

Peace Catalyst International believes that God’s shalom is the biblical vision of our ultimate hope. We believe that the biblical narrative invites us to participate in God’s shalom-building mission by doing the everyday work to shape our lives around shalom and make God’s shalom real in our communities. Peace Catalyst invites you to join us in this fifth act by doing the everyday work to partner in God’s healing work to make all relationships whole: with God, others, ourselves, and the whole of creation.

Notes and References:

1. Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation : An Indigenous Vision* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 45.
2. Ibid, 22.
3. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, "Creation in Jewish and Christian Tradition, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 303.
4. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1985), 15-16.
5. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Fortress Press, 1985), 50.
6. Rom 7:20; cf. Jm 1:14-15; Rm 6:12-14; Ps 19:13.
7. See Gen. 3, Gen. 4:1-16, and Gen. 4:17-24 and until the end of Gen. 12 for the spiral of sin and violence.
8. Ted Grimsrud, *God's Healing Strategy: An Introduction to the Bible's Main Themes* (Cascadia Publishing House, 2011), 45, referencing Genesis 12:3.
9. Cf. Jer 29:7; Jn 14:27, 15:9-17; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:14-22
10. We are indebted here to the work of Perry Yoder in *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Faith and Life Press, 1987), 50-52.
11. Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Faith and Life Press, 1987), 40-41.
12. Ibid.
13. Cf. Deut 10:16-19; 15:12-15; 24:17-19, 21-22; Ex 22:21; 23:9; Lev 19:33-34
14. E.g. Isa 1:11-17; 58:3-7; Am 5:14-24; and Micah 6:1-8
15. Brueggemann, *Peace: Understanding Biblical Themes Series* (Chalice Press, 2001), 102-106.
16. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life* (Orbis Books, 1989), 29.
17. Lev 25:1-28
18. See Isa 11:6-9; 54:10-14; 65: 17-19; 24-25; Zech 8:4-5
19. See Am 3:10-11, 4:1-2, 5:11-12, 5:24, 6:4-7, and 9:11-15
20. For God's justice requirements, see Isaiah chs 56, 58. To see how Isaiah centers the work of a righteous leader or "the servant," see Isa 11: 1-9; 61:1-3; and the "servant songs" Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12.
21. Isa 42:1-4
22. Mic 5:4-5
23. Jer 23:5
24. Ezek 34:23-25; 37:24-28
25. See Werner Foerster, "ειρηνη," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 406. Cf. Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Faith and Life Press, 1987), 19-21 for his discussion of eirēnē and its relationships to shalom.
26. Erich Dinkler, "Eirēnē - The Early Christian Concept," *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, eds. P. Yoder and W. Swartley (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 176.

27. See Ps 2 where “God’s son” is the language used to talk about the king of Israel.
28. See e.g. Isa 2:1-4; 9:6-7; 32:1, 17-18; 52:7; 53:5; 57:19; Ps 29:10-11; 72:1-7 where shalom is translated “prosperity”; Zech. 9:10; Ezek 34:25, with God coming as a shepherd to look after the sheep; cf. Ezek. 37:26-27.
29. Lk 1:26-33; 2:10-14
30. In order to read more about Jesus’s teaching and model of active, nonviolent resistance against their Roman oppressors, we would recommend Walter Wink’s [“Jesus’ Third Way.”](#) an excerpt taken from pages 98-111 of Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (Harmony, 2010).
31. Mt 4:23, 9:35, 11:5, Mk 1:14-15, Lk 4:43, 8:1, 9:11, 7:22, Acts 1:3
32. Compare Lk 4:18-19 to Isa 61:1-2. See Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, 148-162.
33. Lk 4:25-27
34. For Zacchaeus, see Lk 19:1-10; for Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, see Jn 19:39.
35. Lk 9:1-2, 60; 10:5, 9; cf. Mt 10:7-8, 12-13. For translations of “Peace to this house” using the word “Shalom...,” see the Complete Jewish Bible or Orthodox Jewish Bible translations.
36. For these observations about the whole of Holy Week, we deeply appreciated Jason Porterfield’s work in *Fight Like Jesus: How Jesus Waged Peace Throughout Holy Week* (Herald Press (February 1, 2022)).
37. We are especially indebted to Brad Jersak’s work for this articulation of Jesus’s work on the cross as liberative and healing. See Inverse Podcast, [“Dr Brad Jersak: Nonviolent Atonement Series.”](#) Brad Jersak, [“What ‘Christ Died For Our Sins’ Meant to the Fathers.”](#) and several primary readings from the Church Fathers: Athanasius, [On the Incarnation](#); Gregory of Nazianzus, [Letters in Critique of Apollonarius](#); and Cyril of Alexandria, [On the Unity of Christ](#).
38. Hebrews 2:14-15
39. PCI staff are currently writing a follow-up paper, specifically about shalom and the cross... *coming soon*.
40. Eph 2:14
41. Eph 2:14-17; cf Isa 57:19
42. Cf. Phil 2:12
43. Tom Wright, [“How Can the Bible Be Authoritative?”](#) Originally published in *Vox Evangelica* (1991), v 21, 7–32. For more, see N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (SPCK, 2013).
44. Ibid.
45. Cf. 2 Cor 5:20
46. Perry Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Faith and Life Press, 1987), 45-46.