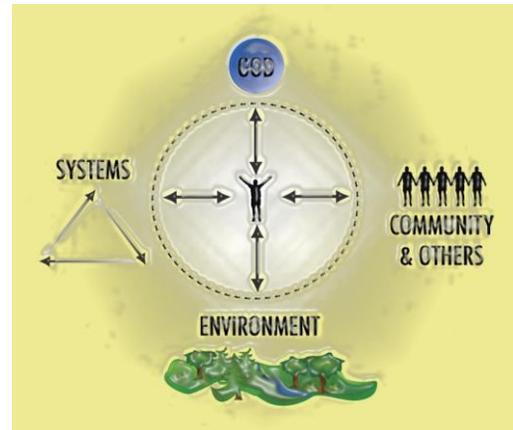


The Meaning of Shalom

The word 'shalom' permeates the entire biblical narrative, weaving itself like a red thread through Scriptures, and holding much of the Bible together. According to Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann: "God's dream is a world in which all creation lives in accordance with the way of shalom." As such, 'shalom' needs to be seen as a lead motif in biblical interpretation, which makes it critical to properly define the term and understand its wide-ranging connotations.

Shalom is a comprehensive word not easily translated into English. We often translate "shalom" as peace, but our concept of 'peace' falls short of the richness of shalom. It is used more than 350 times in the Old Testament and exactly 100 times in the New Testament in its Greek cognate 'eirene'. While the fundamental meaning of Shalom is captured by such words as 'wholeness', 'well-being', 'justice', 'completeness', 'tranquility' and 'right relationships', it is possible to define Shalom under four overarching themes:¹



First of all, shalom refers to physical well-being and health: it is marked by the absence of physical threats like war, disease, and famine and takes on the form of material prosperity and abundance, an inward sense of completeness and wholeness, and of being safe in mind, body or estate, all within the context of a covenant relationship with God. Shalom makes it possible for people to develop and blossom, to be free and unhindered in becoming what God meant them to be. If a person or nation has shalom, no lack exists in any direction, whether personal or national. Jeremiah 33:6-7, in presenting the "healing" restoration of Judah and Israel, wonderfully presents this meaning of shalom: "I am going to bring it recovery and healing; I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first."

The second meaning of shalom is closely related to justice: Whenever there is care for victims of injustice – widows, orphans, aliens, vulnerable and impoverished people; whenever these are raised up and justice is done, there is shalom. Just as war marks the outward absence of shalom between nations, injustice is the measure of the absence of shalom within a society. As the native American public theologian, Randy Woodley, points out: "Shalom is always tested on the margins of a society and revealed by how the poor, oppressed, pressed, disempowered, and needy are treated. A huge gap between the wealthy and the poor may be a good indicator of the lack of shalom." In a related manner, shalom has also an ethical or moral connotation, emphasizing integrity so as to remove deceit and hypocrisy and to promote honesty, uprightness, and straightforwardness.

The third meaning of shalom is based in undivided community: Shalom is not just absence of hostility, but enjoyment in relationships that are wholesome, right, just, and harmonious. To dwell in Shalom is to enjoy living before God, delighting in his e; it is to enjoy life with oneself, delighting in one's identity and calling in God; it is to enjoy living with those close to us and those "other" than us, delighting in human fellowship; it is to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, delighting in its beauty; finally it is to enjoy living within the human institutions and systems, delighting in an order that affirms God's intentions. As Brueggemann denotes: "The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature."

The fourth meaning, finally, is cosmic in scope – it is the world as it should be, rather than the world as it is: a resting place of deep spiritual contentment, of great joy, where the deepest longing of all creation for both inner fulfillment and external harmony with all else comes to pass. Since God himself is Shalom, as Gideon points out in Judges 6:24, this gift of Shalom originates with God; indeed, there is no Shalom apart from God for he is its source.

¹ The following definitions stem, in part, from Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word of Salvation, Justice, and Peace*. Institute of Mennonite Studies Series Number 7. Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987, p. 9.; Arthur F. Glasser, *Announcing the Kingdom*, 130; Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor*; Robert Linthicum, *City of God City of Satan*; Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*

