

***Shalom***

## Shalom

The Hebrew word *shalom* means wholeness, and is translated into English using such terms as completeness, soundness, peace, well-being, health, prosperity and salvation. It implies a state of mind of being at peace and satisfied, and social relationships characterized by harmony and mutual support. It is based on three fundamental principles: this world and all in it belongs to God, all humans share equally in God's loving concern (God shows no favoritism to some people or nations), and the reign of God in creation and in human communities leads to peace, justice and truly fulfilled lives. *Shalom* is a transcultural and timeless concept, but like other such symbols it finds its expression in the concrete situations of real life in real cultures and real history. In the Old Testament, the focus is more on earthly wholeness. In the New Testament the dimension of eternal life comes into sharper focus.

One attribute of *shalom* is *agape*, the identification with and unconditional commitment to the other. This is not a response to the desirable, lovable or admirable, but to the needy, undesired, unloved and enemy. *Shalom* initiates action, accepts vulnerability, bears suffering and always hopes for the best. The supreme manifestation is Christ's crucifixion. A second attribute is righteousness. In Scripture, true *shalom* and righteousness flow from right relationships with God (Is. 60:17), and reflect his character, namely righteousness, love, justice, peace, and perfection. There can be no *shalom* while one persists in sin and evil (Is. 48:18, 54:13), and the renewal of righteousness is essential to the restoration of *shalom*. A third attribute is peace. This is not, as the modern world sees it, simply freedom from feelings of guilt, serenity and peace of mind, nor merely the absence of war. It actively seeks harmonious, mutually edifying

relationships in community life. A fourth attribute is the concept of health. *Shalom* communicates the sense of human well being in which physical, emotional, mental, moral and spiritual health are inextricably intertwined. Unlike the Western worldview which differentiates between spirit and body, spiritual and material realities, the Hebrew worldview views humans as whole beings in which spiritual, moral, mental and physical attributes are inextricably intertwined. A fifth attribute is *koinonia*. *Shalom* speaks of social fellowship and communal harmony between friends, parties and nations.

*Shalom* is an essential part of God's cosmic plan, and is one of the threads running through Scriptures, linking cosmic, human and individual histories into a single coherent story. It began at creation when God saw all he had created and it was good. Only man alone was not good (Gen. 2:18), because he was not in community.

The fall shattered this harmony. In the biblical worldview, sin is at root the breaking of *shalom*--the severing of relationships. It began with the break in right relationships with God when humans put themselves as the center of their being, and worshiped themselves. It led to broken human relationships between genders (Gen. 3:15), brothers (Gen 4:8), and human communities (Gen. 11:9). The result was jealousy, hatred, ethnocentrism, rivalries, injustice, violence and wars.

The establishment of *shalom* is at the heart of God's plan of salvation. In Christ, God reached out to save fallen humans, and to reconcile them to himself. Salvation begins with forgiveness with God through Christ Jesus, and finds expression in the restoration of human relationships to God, and to one another in the church, the body of Christ. *Shalom* is associated

with a peace covenant in which this restoration of relationships and righteousness takes place (Num. 25:12, Ez. 34:5, Is. 54:7-8).

The final and full manifestation of *shalom* will occur when Christ returns and the Kingdom of God is established over all creation. Then *shalom* and righteousness will reign in Zion (Is. 60:17, Ps 85:8-9), and violence and destruction will occur no more. *Shalom* is both a present reality in the life of the believer and the church, but also a future culmination in which all creation will be restored in harmony under the reign of Christ.

*Shalom* is of the essence of the Kingdom of God. It symbolizes the presence of God who works to restore the entire creation to fulfill the purposes for which he created it. In the signs of this kingdom, such as salvation, reconciliation, and healing, people see the presence of God in this world bringing life out of death, love and peace in the midst of hate and violence, and meaning to meaninglessness. Nature itself is included in God's salvation for it will be a part of the new heaven and new earth which are essential in God's work to restore *shalom* throughout all his creation.

*Shalom* is to characterize the *ekklesia*, the 'assembly' or gathering of God's people. It is the test and hallmark of the church's divine nature as the outpost of the Kingdom now on earth--the community that emerges when the covenant relationship between God and his people is restored, and that gives expression to the harmony intended by God. This church is not a social institution, although it find expression in social forms. It is the community of the Spirit open to all who turn to God for reconciliation. At its heart is *koinonia*, the fellowship and harmony that gives rise to a new saved and saving community based on the covenant of love that binds people together in mutual submission to one another. It is a new community that breaks down the walls

of language, race, class, gender and nationalism. It is also called to be make peace--to seek social justice, provision for the needy including widows, orphans and the poor, and protection of the exploited and oppressed. Above all, it is apostolic, sent into the world with a divine commission to proclaim that the rule of God is at hand, that Jesus is Lord, and that people should change their ways and live in the light of the new reality and form new communities of followers.

*Shalom* is to characterize the life of the individual Christian. Unlike the West, which sees autonomous, free individuals as the fundamental units of human reality, and differentiates between personal and social systems, Scripture sees individuals as fully human only as they are a part of communities of *shalom*, and healing as rooted in the community. Dan Fountain points out, "God's plan for the world is this: that all persons everywhere, in every nation, know God's saving health and be delivered from disobedience, disruption, despair, disease and all that would destroy our wholeness."

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