

SHALOM



A STUDY OF THE BIBLICAL
CONCEPT OF PEACE

by Donald E. Gowan

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Introduction

What Do We Mean When We Say "Peace?"

This is the study of an idea. In English we call it "peace," but there is also a Hebrew word we like to use, which is generally equivalent to our English term. It is the word *Shalom!* In modern usage this term has become almost as common as "have a nice day." But *shalom* comes from the Bible and is far more than a pleasant expression of good wishes. It is a theological term of broad significance: hence, a whole course on the idea of *shalom*.

Shalom means a good deal more than our English word "peace," as you will soon discover. Since it is the idea of peace which leads us to be interested in the term in the first place, however, it seems appropriate to begin with what we know about that familiar word "peace."

What do we mean when we say "peace?" That's not a hard question to answer; all of us can begin to define it. But peace doesn't always mean exactly the same thing every time we say it; the word has an important range of meaning. Therefore, to ask the question "What does the English word 'peace' mean?" is a useful way to begin studying the Biblical concept of *shalom*. Here are some examples to start your thinking:

- "War makes rattling good history; but peace is poor reading." (Thomas Hardy)

- "Europe is in danger of plunging into a cold peace." (Boris Yeltsin)
- "Rest in Peace" is a familiar tombstone inscription.
- "Will you please leave me in peace?" the distraught mother said.
- "Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding."
- "The Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councillor or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Does peace mean the same thing in each of these contexts? Not exactly. But we understand them all. It might be useful at the beginning of this study for you to try to classify the ways the word has been used so far and to see how much further you can go in thinking of common ways it is used in daily speech. Or perhaps you can come up with some not so common ways. Then analyze how they are related to one another.

Here is what one dictionary says about peace. It may help you to start your classification, but it really doesn't tell the whole story:

peace

1. a pact or agreement to end hostilities, between those who have been at war or in a state of hostility.
2. A state of tranquility or quiet; esp. a. Freedom from civil disturbance or war; b. Public order or security as provided by law; as, a breach of the peace.
3. Harmony in personal relations; mutual concord.
4. Freedom from fears, agitating passions, moral conflict, etc.
5. One who or that which makes or

maintains peace. (What did the lexicographer mean by that? Is he getting theological? Could it be a reference to the New Testament: "He is our peace" in Ephesians 2:14? Where does the New Testament's "peace of God" fit into the dictionary definition?)

It's a good word, peace. Think for a bit about how much of what we hope for in life is summed up in the word. But let's be realistic about it, and as complete as possible. Think also about the things which make life good for you which can by no stretch of the imagination be connected with peace. You might include professional football, for example, or the restless urge for greater achievement. The English word does, however, sum up a good many of our deepest human desires for life.

Peace In the Old Testament

Now let's move a step further toward our real subject. The word *shalom* is one of the few Hebrew words which is well known and widely understood by English speaking people. There are probably only two better-known Hebrew words: Amen and Hallelujah. If you say "*Shalom!*" to people when parting from them, what do you mean by that? If someone says it to you, what do you think he has said? Perhaps you know it's something good, with no insult intended, maybe just a sort of vague expression of well-wishing. Or very likely you automatically translate it as a wish for "peace." Which of the definitions of the English word peace properly belong to *shalom*? The answer, when we look to the Old Testament to see what the biblical writers meant by the word, is: *shalom* includes all the meanings we have discussed so far, plus a lot more. In this introduction, we'll just sample a few of those uses to convince ourselves what an important word *shalom* is in the Bible. Then in the next lesson, we shall work through it with some care.

Shalom is the climax of the priestly benediction in Numbers 6:24-26, summing up, it would seem, the best one can expect from God:

The Lord bless you and keep you;

The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you *shalom*.

It is also the climax of Isaiah's description of the coming righteous king, providing for Christians one of their favorite titles for Jesus:

And he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of *shalom*. (Isaiah 9:6)

It is used, in parallel with "light," as a symbol for all that is good:

I form light and create darkness,

I make *shalom* and create woe,

I the Lord, do all these things. (Isaiah 45:7)

Ezekiel sums up God's promise of a blessed future with:

I will make a covenant of *shalom* with them;

It shall be an everlasting covenant with them;

And I will bless them and multiply them. (Ezekiel 37:26)

Peace in the New Testament

This is a brief sampling of the approximately 250 uses of *shalom* in the Hebrew Bible. It does not occur at all, of course, in the Greek New Testament. There is a Greek word, however, which is almost its exact equivalent in meaning. We don't use it at all in daily speech, as we use *shalom*, but it is not quite so strange to us as it appears at first glance. The word is *eirene* (pronounced eye-RAY-nay). The woman's name, Irene, is our mispronunciation of that very word (those who say "Ireenee" get closer to it). When we say that a person is "irenic," meaning peaceful or conciliatory, we are of course using a derivative from that same Greek word. Even though it is not a word which is familiar to most people, we can use it in this course alongside *shalom*, since it does have some associations with our own language.

Eirene is a potent word in the New Testament. The angels use it to announce the birth of Jesus:

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth *eirene* among those whom he favors. (Luke 2:14)

It is virtually equivalent to the gospel in Acts 10:36:

You know the message which he sent to the people of Israel,
preaching *eirene* by Jesus Christ.

It becomes part of the standard greeting of most letters in the New Testament. For example:

Grace to you and *eirene* from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:7)

It is the heart of a blessing which we use to this day in worship:

And the *eirene* of God, which surpasses all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:7)

In its approximately 90 occurrences in the Greek New Testament, *eirene* is used in most of the same ways that *shalom* is used in the Old Testament. However, it takes on a new flavor as a term which is now defined by what God has done for human beings through Jesus Christ. In many a passage the gospel, the good news, is precisely the message of peace.

Unusual Uses

This brief sampling of some of the more striking occurrences of *shalom* and *eirene* has been intended to allay any doubts about whether a study of the concepts they represent is important enough for a whole course of study. It is. You haven't seen anything yet. But one might grant that the ideas they convey are very important and go on to ask a different question: Aren't these ideas obvious? We all understand what peace means. We have heard those benedictions from Numbers 6 and Philippians 4 all our lives, and it's surely not so hard to appreciate the promise of peace with God and with our fellow human beings. What is there to study?

There are two answers to this question. First, the subject is important enough and broad enough that no one can ever really exhaust it. The proof of that must come in succeeding sessions. The other answer is that it's not all so obvious after all. When we come to the material on "Blessed are the peacemakers," that will become only too clear; but in the meantime, consider some of the surprising uses of *shalom*:

And David asked him concerning the *shalom* of Joab, and the *shalom* of the people, and the *shalom* of the war. (2 Samuel 11:7; my translation.)

(The peace of war?)

So he (Gideon) said to the people of Penuel, "When I come back in *shalom*, I will break down this tower." (Judges 8:9)

(That's peaceful?)

But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment of our *shalom*,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

(What does punishment have to do with peace?)

You see, some of the Old Testament uses of *shalom* aren't so obvious, but with a little study most of them can be understood easily enough. They aren't transparent, but neither are they completely mysterious.

The New Testament contains some surprising texts, as well. Why do we call Jesus "Prince of Peace" when he said,

Do not think that I have come to bring *eirene* on earth;
I have not come to bring *eirene*, but a sword. (Matthew 10:34)

Indeed, "peace" sounds strangely militant in a few New Testament texts:

The God of *eirene* will shortly crush Satan under your feet.
(Romans 16:20)

And in Ephesians 6:13-15 the "gospel of *eirene*" is part of the whole armor of God, with which one is enabled to "withstand in the evil day."

The fact is the words *shalom* and *eirene* simply mean more than our word "peace" does. We can't just automatically substitute our word for the Biblical terms every time and find that a passage makes sense. One of the first tasks in our study, then, is to be sure we have covered the whole range of meanings of *shalom* and *eirene*, so that whenever we read the words we will know what they mean, and will not be puzzled by some of the unusual occurrences. Here some comments about English translations may be helpful.

Tips about Translation

Especially in the Old Testament, words other than "peace" are often appropriately used to translate the biblical term. For example, in Genesis 43:27 the Hebrew reads, "And he (Joseph) asked of them (his brothers) concerning *shalom*, and he said, 'Is your father *shalom*?' " That is good idiomatic Hebrew, but it is not good English, so the New Revised Standard Version translates properly. "And he inquired about their *welfare*, and said 'Is your father well?' " Thus you will occasionally find these chapters referring you to a passage where you can't find any sign of the word "peace" in your English translation. It won't be a mistake. Either you may take my word for it that *shalom* and *eirene* lie behind the translation, or you may check it in the old concordances to the King James Version by Young or Strong, which contain keys to the original Greek and Hebrew words.

We shall encounter difficult texts on which a great deal of scholarly effort has been expended. The aim of these chapters will be to make the issues of interpretation clear, to present as concisely as possible the main explanations which have been offered, including their strengths and weaknesses, and then to suggest the implications for our faith and action of one alternative or another.

Having mentioned action, I must also warn you that another kind of difficulty may arise. You may have been attracted to this study because you are deeply concerned about issues of world peace. You may already have seen from this first chapter that "peace" in the Bible includes a great deal more than that. But "world peace" is part of it. Or, you may be a bit suspicious of a study on "peace," tending to equate it with pacifism. It is surely one of the ironies of our time that "peace" is always a good word, but "peacemaking" tends to arouse some feelings of alarm.

When one denomination adopted peacemaking as a major concern, a minister commented that talking to his congregation about "peacemaking" on the international level was likely to produce immediate conflict in the church. *Shalom* is, thus, not only a key Biblical term representing a central teaching of the Jewish and Christian faiths, it is also potentially a controversial idea. Those who tend to equate it automatically with pacifism or questions about disarmament, however, should be assured that there is far more to it than that in the Bible. This is all the more reason for us to understand what the Bible does and does not say about *shalom*, what God is doing about it, and what God expects us to do.

Guidelines for Study

Background from the Author

Session 1 should start you thinking about the English word "peace." It appears that all the English uses correspond to ways *shalom* and *eirene* are used in the Bible. In addition, there are other meanings for the words *shalom* and *eirene* which are not used for the English word "peace." So, the breadth of the meaning of the English word will be considered as a first step toward thinking about the importance of the term theologically.

The Old Testament part of the word study uses only the noun *shalom* (also used at times as an adjective or an adverb) and does not include any of the uses of the related verb. The verb sometimes does mean "to make peace," but it has other uses which do not seem to be related to the noun at all. It seems better, therefore, to omit any consideration of the verb. It would not add anything to the thematic study, and it might tend to complicate matters.

If you know the Old Testament, you may wonder about the omission of any discussion of the "peace-offerings." They are omitted for essentially the same reasons. Although related to *shalom* (the word is *shelamim*) the reason for the name of that particular sacrifice is still debated. An effort to explain the so-called peace offerings would only lead through several conflicting theories, without making any real contribution to the understanding of the theme of the course.

Questions for Reflection

1. List as many uses for the English word "peace" as you can. Can you think of at least four synonyms for the English word "peace?"
2. Reviewing the Old Testament examples in this session, can you develop a working definition of the term *shalom*?
3. Reviewing the New Testament examples in this session, can you develop a working definition of the term *eirene*?
4. Review the section "Unusual Uses." Does this help you grasp the breadth of meanings for the words *shalom* and *eirene*?

For Further Study

1. Using a concordance, locate as many uses of the word *shalom* in the Old Testament and *eirene* in the New Testament as you can.
2. Compare the following passages in several different versions of the Bible: 2 Samuel 11:7; Judges 8:9; Isaiah 53:5; Matthew 10:34; Romans 16:20. Do these versions clarify or confuse the meaning for you?