

# Followers of the Way

## Peace (in a time of war)

Philip Quenby 5-5-24

**Psalm 46:1-11; Isaiah 57:14-21**

This is the third in our sermon series looking at the fruit of the Spirit. So far, we have covered love and joy. Today's topic is peace. We will examine this through the lens of three questions: (1) what does the world call peace? (2) what does the Bible call peace? and (3) what does biblical peace look like in a season of war? Because, like it or not, this is a warfare season.

### **The world's idea of peace**

Peace – like truth, love, justice, righteousness, and beauty, indeed anything requiring value judgments – is a word whose meaning is susceptible to misuse and manipulation. The dictionary definition is a state of quiet or tranquillity; absence of civil disturbance or agitation; freedom from or cessation of war or hostilities; a state of friendliness; calmness of mind. But the gulf between the reality of peace and what the world calls by that name is often huge. Describing his country's treatment of conquered nations, Roman historian Tacitus wrote, "They make a desert and call it peace." Returning to Britain in 1938 after meeting Hitler at Munich, where the Western Allies shamefully abandoned Czechoslovakia, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain proclaimed "peace for our time ... peace with honour." Less than a year later, we were at war with Germany. Sometimes in talking about peace, we are simply deluding ourselves. In 1938 there was a Phoney Peace that mirrored the subsequent Phoney War. But when brutal reality at last intruded, people found they were instead in the era of Total War. Human politics seldom do a good job of delivering true peace.

Nor do human philosophies and man's idea of religion do much better. In 1955 something called the Peace Pole Project was started in Japan as a response to the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Peace poles are supposedly a reminder for us to keep peace in our hearts and thoughts, so peace becomes a way of life and we "become" peace. There are over 200,000 of these peace poles in 190 countries, set up by people like the Dalai Lama, Mother Theresa, former US President Jimmy Carter, and Deepak Chopra (an alternative medicine advocate). There is a so-called Peace Pagoda in Battersea Park, London. But the Buddhist or Hindu's idea of peace in fact brings passivity, not the active body, mind, soul, and spirit God intends, and what a Muslim means by peace is not what we would recognise by that word. Islam divides the world into the house of peace (*dar al-Islam*, meaning regions under Islamic control), and assigns everywhere else to the house of war (*dar al-Harb*).

The UN currently has eleven peacekeeping missions across the globe. These are in Kosovo, on the Indo-Pakistan border, between Greek and Turkish areas of Cyprus, in Western Sahara, on the Israeli-Lebanon border, along the Golan Heights, in South Sudan, Chad, Congo, and the Central African Republic, with a small team also in Jerusalem. None has brought true peace, and mostly they have proven incapable of holding warring factions apart when they really want to fight. Jesus' blessing in the Sermon on the Mount, of course, is not for *peacekeepers*, but *peace-makers* (Matthew 5:9). He was commending those who bring in the kind of peace the Bible describes, not the perversion of it the world so often peddles. Jesus was never interested in the pious statements beloved of politicians down the ages – it is His peace that He wishes to see His people manifest, and this is the peace He will usher in Himself in all its fullness when He comes again to rule and reign from Jerusalem. So, let us look at the kind of peace the Bible describes, remembering this is through and through a Jewish book – both the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*, Old Testament), also the New Testament – so, even if New Testament writers use the Greek word *eirene* for peace, it is the Hebrew concept of *shalom* they are trying to convey.

### **Biblical peace**

The English word *peace* fails to capture the wealth of meaning in *shalom*, and nor does *eirene*, meaning peace in the sense of law and order resulting in the blessing of prosperity. *Shalom* is much richer and more wide-ranging than either of these.

The root word behind *shalom* is *shalam*, meaning to make something whole. *Shalam* appears fourteen times in Exodus 21 and 22, where Moses gives instructions concerning loss or theft of property. When loss or injury occurs, the owner is considered lacking or incomplete, and the person responsible had to make things right. So, *shalam* is translated with phrases like, “make it good,” “shall surely pay,” “make full restitution,” or “restore.” *Shalam* conveys the overall idea of fulness and completeness in mind, body, and estate (goods, status), and this concept of wholeness carries over into the word *Shalom*. Joseph, speaking to his brothers, “asked them about their **well-being**, and said, “Is your father **well**, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?” And they answered, “Your servant our father is **in good health**; he is still alive.” (Genesis 43:27-28, NKJV). In these sentences, wellbeing, well, and in good health all translate the single word *shalom*.

Since true biblical *shalom* comes from an inward sense of completeness or wholeness, although it can describe the absence of war, the Bible mostly uses it to refer to inner completeness and tranquility. It is in this sense Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you” (John 14:27), repeating this after His resurrection when he appeared to His disciples and said, “Peace be with you.” (Luke 24:36). Almost certainly, the words He uttered on the latter occasion were, *shalom lehkhem* (Peace to you), a phrase still in common usage in modern Israel. Likewise, when the Apostle Paul, a Jewish rabbi, ended his second letter to the church in Thessalonica with the phrase, “Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way” (2 Thessalonians 3:16), what he was conveying was the idea of “may you be full of well-being,” or “may health and prosperity be upon you.”

Knowing this richness of meaning in *shalom* helps resolve what might otherwise seem contradictory:

On a personal level – that we can have the Lord’s peace even though Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). External trouble and inward *shalom* are not mutually exclusive;

On a corporate level – that the Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:26-28) pronounces peace (*shalom*) at a time when Israel was at war, first against the Amalekites (Exodus 17:8-13), and then to take possession of the Promised Land. In and of itself, war should not take away our *shalom*.

On an End-time prophetic level – that we are told to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6-9), even though the Scriptures show this city will experience war and turmoil until Jesus comes again. In fact, the ultimate *shalom* of Jerusalem will come about only when the Prince of *Shalom* establishes His throne there in the Millennial age. In a sense, then, praying for the *shalom* of Jerusalem is praying not just for its short-term prosperity, but for Jesus to come again.

Knowing the *meaning* of *shalom* is a good first step towards broadening our understanding of what the Bible means by peace, but even more important is knowing the *source* of *shalom*. The first mention of *shalom* in the Bible is disguised in English because it appears as the name of a place. After Abram (later called Abraham) rescued his nephew Lot from local warlords who had taken him captive, the patriarch encountered the enigmatic priest-king Melchizedek, ruler of Salem (Genesis 14:18-20). As the writer of Hebrews explains, Melchizedek means “king of righteousness” (Hebrews 7:2) and king of Salem means “king of peace” (Hebrews 7:2). Hebrews 7 goes on to make explicit the link between Melchizedek and Jesus, the Messiah. This connection between Jesus and *shalom* is picked up in earlier prophecy, with the coming Messiah being called “Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

The source of *shalom*, then, is God Himself, with His *shalom* mediated through Jesus as Prince of Peace, and the Holy Spirit as the imparter of fruit that includes *shalom* (Galatians 5:22). This *shalom*, which “transcends all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7). It is not given to us as the world gives (John 14:27), so the world cannot understand it. It comes from connection with God, an inward sense of fullness and safety that flows from the impartation into us of His *shalom*, and such a deep appreciation and conviction that we are sons of a good heavenly Father that our hearts and minds are guarded against everything that might otherwise disturb them.

### ***Shalom* in a time of war**

All this brings us to our Bible readings, and as we turn to examine these, we will consider what *shalom* looks like in a time of war, and how we can be a people of *shalom* even in the increasing turmoil that lies ahead for our nation and for the world. The Bible says God “will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in [the LORD]” (Isaiah 26:3). We need to know how to access this perfect *shalom*, but also how to position ourselves in a world where *shalom* is very much lacking.

Psalm 46 is an incredible Scripture. Beginning, middle, and end contain powerful affirmations of God's sovereign power and protection – God as our refuge, strength, help (Psalm 46:1), and fortress (Psalm 46:7, 46:11). It starts and ends with statements of confidence in Him, breaking off part-way through with an ecstatic glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem: “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.” (Psalm 46:4-5). It contains God's profound exhortation for us to “Be still and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10). All this should give us hope and calm assurance, but these must be coupled with clear-sighted realism about the situation we face. For the surrounding circumstances this Psalm describes are the very opposite of what the world would call peace:

Creation is characterised by natural disasters: the Psalmist foresees a world in which “the earth [gives] way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea ... waters roar and foam, and the mountains quake” (Psalm 46:2-3).

Politics is in a state of upheaval, and calamity is all around: “Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; [God] lifts his voice, the earth melts.” (Psalm 46:6).

War, violence, and devastation are the backdrop to God's saving intervention: “He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth” (Psalm 46:9) – suggesting war is widespread before God steps in to stop it – and the Psalmist invites us to “Come and see the works of the LORD, the desolations he has brought on the earth.” (Psalm 46:8).

To put it mildly, this is not a happy picture. It should cause us to examine ourselves carefully before God; should give rise to sober reflection on where Church and nation presently stand as regards His laws, decrees, plans, and purposes; should make us more eager than ever to do whatever we can to snatch friends, family, neighbours, workmates, and even total strangers from the burning. Because God cannot be mocked (Galatians 6:7). For sure, His desire is to bless, forgive, heal, redeem, and save “him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. [He] will not accuse for ever, nor will [He] always be angry.” (Isaiah 57:15-16). His promise for those who take hold of His gift of salvation by accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is that He “will heal him; [He] will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace, to those far and near,’ says the LORD. ‘And I will heal them.’” (Isaiah 57:18-19). These are wonderful assurances for believers to stand on. Their ultimate fulfilment is in the age to come, but we can start to walk in them now.

The necessary flip side for unbelievers is that all who reject God face a reckoning. He is “the high and lofty One ... who lives for ever, whose name is holy” (Isaiah 57:15), whose “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Habakkuk 1:13), and whose Kingdom has no place for evil. The result is that eternal hell-fire awaits unrepentant sinners, who will forever be deprived of *shalom*: “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (Isaiah 57:20-21). This is the reality of *shalom* in a time of spiritual war, and every inhabitant of this planet faces a choice: to be upheld by the *shalom* of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through happenings that will cause “men [to] ... faint from terror” (Luke 21:26), or

to be at the mercy of these events, and ultimately at the mercy of the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), Satan.

Wherever possible, Christians should be people of peace. Peace is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), and Paul counsels, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18). In the Millennial reign of Christ on earth, His peace will prevail, and He will make “wars cease to the ends of the earth” (Psalm 46:9). Then men “will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks.” (Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3).

Yet sadly, before this Millennial reign, there is still the need for God’s people to fight. Solomon wrote, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven ... a time for war and a time for peace.” (Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 8). To be a person of *shalom* is not inconsistent with being part of the army of God. In fact, there is a warring in the Spirit needed if God’s *shalom* is to come in. This is a time when we need through spiritual warfare to “contend for the faith that was once and for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3), to contend for the Church, and to contend for our nation – a time to “Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war! Rouse the warriors! Let all the fighting men draw near and attack. Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears. Let the weakling say, ‘I am strong!’” (Joel 3:9-10). We must not let a wrong reading of what the Bible teaches about *shalom* persuade us we can sit on our hands in the great spiritual battles of our day. Of course, a Christian’s “struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12). And, as Paul said, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.” (2 Corinthians 10:4). Jesus commands us to “love [our] enemies” (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27, 6:35), but this does not mean we should capitulate in the face of evil.

### **Application**

God’s call is for us to “Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.” (Isaiah 57:1). There are many different aspects to doing this, but here are three suggestions in the context of what we have been looking at concerning *shalom*:

**Access *shalom*:** God “will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in [the LORD]” (Isaiah 26:3). As so often, this involves cooperation between us and Him. We need to keep our minds steadfast and trust, then He will do as He has promised. When events threaten to rob us of our *shalom*, we must make a conscious effort to turn our thoughts to the truths of Scripture and reaffirm our trust in the LORD.

**Share *shalom*:** if we get to the point where we have so much *shalom* that it starts to spill out from us to others, this is where we become peacemakers (*shalom*-sharers) in the sense Jesus meant (Matthew 5:9). Being this receptive to God’s impartation of *shalom* means operating from a place of rest (being still), of knowing God, and of trusting fully in Him. One of the things that will make us distinctive in the coming days and draw people to us (or, more correctly, to the One who is within us) is our *shalom*. When they contrast our calm assurance in the face of calamity with the world’s panic, they will want the *shalom* we carry and we will be able to point them to its source.

**Do not fall for counterfeit *shalom*:** God's peace is not passivity, and it does not involve surrender to, compliance with, or tolerance of evil. The Bible has harsh words for people who say, "Peace, peace' ... when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14), and we do no-one any favours if we fail to speak truth. This is not to say we should preach hell-fire and damnation wherever we go – our job is to point people to the kindness of God, which leads people to repentance (Romans 2:4), whereas it is the job of the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin (John 16:8). But we do need to be straightforward in explaining that true peace will never come through worldly success, wealth and possessions, the latest lifestyle fads, false religions, or any of the blandishments of this world. It can be found only in Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace.

May God bless you with more of His *shalom* in your life, open doors for you to share this *shalom* widely, and keep you from all the world's counterfeits of this *shalom*.

Amen