



The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right

By Lisa Sharon Harper

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God once declared everything in the world “very good.”

Can you imagine it?

A Vision of Hope for a Broken World

Shalom is what God declared. *Shalom* is what the Kingdom of God looks like.

Shalom is when all people have enough.

It's when families are healed.

It's when churches, schools, and public policies protect human dignity.

Shalom is when the image of God is recognized in every single human.

Shalom is our calling as followers of Jesus's gospel. It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the restoration God desires for every relationship.

What can we do to bring *shalom* to our nations, our communities, and our souls? Through a careful exploration of biblical text, particularly the first three chapters of Genesis, Lisa Sharon Harper shows us what “very good” can look like today, even after the Fall.

Because despite our anxious minds, despite division and threats of violence, God's vision remains: Wholeness for a hurting world. Peace for a fearful soul. *Shalom*.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Very Good Gospel*

“Lisa Sharon Harper is so smart and interesting—she’s a wonderful leader. I respect her immensely and am passionate about the message of this book.”

—**Jen Hatmaker**, speaker and best-selling author of *For the Love*

“For anyone who has ever wondered if we were meant for more, Lisa Sharon Harper’s *The Very Good Gospel* provides a resounding ‘yes’ revealing God’s eternal vision of *shalom* for all creation—people, families, genders, races, and the nations. Our gospel has long been presented in a shallow way—and unattractive in its narrowness. *The Very Good Gospel* declares the breadth of God’s Word, reconciling social justice and personal salvation, and inviting readers to share the rich message of *shalom* for all people, as it was intended.”

—**Michael Eric Dyson**, political analyst, professor, and best-selling author of *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*

“Lisa Sharon Harper has presented the gospel, the good news, as it was meant to be—whole and complete. Our world has compromised so many elements of the good news that we are left with a divided gospel. We need to recover the whole Christian gospel, the wholeness of the church, the wholeness of relationships. Lisa has unleashed the whole-ism of *shalom*. Her application of the good news for America, for our culture, in the world, reminds us that God is bigger than our problems. My wish is that Christians and non-Christians alike read this book.”

—**Dr. John Perkins**, co-founder of the Christian Community Development Association, founder of the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation in Jackson, Mississippi, and author of *Let Justice Roll Down*

“For many decades, both mainline Christianity and the evangelical church have been captive to competing, shallow, and ‘thin’ understandings of what the good news of the gospel really is. In *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper masterfully presents the case that the very good news God brings to us is about the restoration of *shalom*—that is to say peace, well-being, wholeness, and abundance—which conquers the false dichotomy between social justice and personal salvation. Lisa shows us that God’s creation is emphatically, even forcefully, good, and it is the duty of every human being to responsibly steward God’s creation. Lisa’s clear, evocative prose blends scholarly theological insights with moving life experiences to show the clear applications of the gospel to our cross-gender relationships, our struggle against racism, how we care for the environment, our relationships with ourselves, and much more. I strongly recommend this book to anyone who seeks to understand God’s true purpose for the world and for our lives.”

—**Jim Wallis**, New York Times best-selling author of *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, president of Sojourners, and editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine

“There are lots of ‘gospels’ out there competing for our affection—the gospel of the Kardashians, of Trump, of American exceptionalism—but Lisa Sharon Harper dives into the one true gospel, God’s very good news. On these pages, the Garden of Eden meets the world we live in. Harper stirs up an ancient, radical vision of *shalom*, whereby God heals all the wounds that sin has created—in our hearts, in our streets, and in our world.”

—**Shane Claiborne**, activist and author of *Executing Grace*

“To speak of the gospel as good news, it has to be good news for the oppressed, the impoverished, the brokenhearted. To embody God’s shalom is to embrace and restore the image of God in all humanity no matter who or where they are. Chapter by chapter Lisa Sharon Harper builds the case for reading, understanding, and living the gospel as the life-giving, freedom-bringing, shalom-infused reality it really is. There are new, exciting voices coming from a new, younger generation of evangelicals, and they are turning the traditional meaning of that word around. Lisa Sharon Harper is such a voice and well worth hearing.”
—**Allan Boesak**, South African human-rights activist and the Desmond Tutu Chair of Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation Studies at Christian Theological Seminary and Butler University

“Lisa Sharon Harper writes in a fresh and personal way, combining rich theology with deep experience working with contemporary issues to inspire us not to settle for a thin gospel but a thick gospel—the fullness of the good news of God’s reconciliation and shalom that touches all aspects of life. *The Very Good Gospel* is for all of us struggling with how the good news of Jesus should impact not just our own lives but also speak to the injustices in our world. This book brings all the threads together and weaves a glorious picture of God’s redemptive work in creation.”
—**Ken Wytsma**, president of Kilns College and author of *Pursuing Justice* and *Create vs. Copy*

“Exposing racism, sexism, and exploitation as a direct assault on God, *The Very Good Gospel* weaves its wisdom around God’s shalom—the blessed web of creation, where the flourishing of one is a flourishing of all. It is beautiful and true. Thank you, Lisa!”
—**Dr. Mimi Haddad**, president of Christians for Biblical Equality, www.cbeinternational.org

“Part mountaineer, part miner, Lisa Sharon Harper has somehow ascended the mountain of Scripture to survey its entirety while also digging deep into its core to extract raw truth of immense implication and conviction. Lisa’s revealing stories, scriptural depth, and prophetic voice make *The Very Good Gospel* a very good read—one you won’t want to miss.”
—**David Drury**, chief of staff for the Wesleyan Church World Headquarters and author of nine books including *Transforming Presence*

“One can scan across the landscape of the church and not find a better articulator of the essence of the gospel in the twenty-first century. Lisa Sharon Harper follows a rich tradition of reformers and iconoclast theological practitioners who deeply love the gospel and God’s people. She has made it her life’s project to challenge lethargic and cynical people to live love and practice justice. Our world is richer and more vibrant because of her compassionate and strong voice.”
—**Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III**, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ and author of *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World*

“In a world that has legitimate reasons to question the possibility of a good God, Lisa Sharon Harper reminds us what is in fact not only good but beautiful about the God who loves us more than we want to be loved. Her winsome words wash over the reader with gentleness, while simultaneously striking out with a fierce love that is corrective and healing. *The Very Good Gospel* is more than just a social activist’s field guide; it is a road map to a better world—one marked by faith, hope, and love.”
—**Christopher L. Heuertz**, author, activist, and founding partner of Gravity: A Center for Contemplative Activism

“Christian social activist and public speaker at Sojourners in Washington, D.C., Lisa Sharon Harper (*Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican ... or Democrat*) releases a salient, provocative look at scripture through the lens of her own life. From the shalom offered by God to humanity in Genesis, through the

"wreckage of the fall," and forward to Jesus' "very good" gospel, Harper mirrors scripture's long arc with contextual family drama, including information about her "third great-grandmother" who was "the last adult slave in [Harper's] family." In an engaging accessible voice, she interweaves the provocative history of 19th-century evangelical movements, 20th-century social gospel and civil rights movements, and the 21st-century Black Lives Matter movement with her own testimony of coming to Christ and her varied experiences as a progressive evangelical. Harper provides detailed history, statistics, and vibrant stories that reveal the possibility of America's redemption. The willing reader will be restored to a "very good" gospel, which sets free those who are broken, economically poor, abused, ashamed, and oppressed. Built on a foundation of solid biblical study, Harper provides a vital, effective contribution to the narrative theology movement. When systematic theologian James W. McClendon coined the phrase "biography as theology," he was advocating for this book: life stories that remake the way we think about God today. (June)" —**Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

About the Author

Lisa Sharon Harper is the chief church engagement officer at Sojourners, a nonprofit organization committed to putting Christian faith into action in the pursuit of social justice, peace, and environmental stewardship. She is the author of several books, including *Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican...or Democrat* and coauthor of *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*. Harper has been recognized by *The Huffington Post* as one of "50 Powerful Women Religious Leaders" and is considered one of the nation's most influential voices on a faith-rooted approach to advocacy. Harper speaks extensively, nationally and internationally, and lives in Washington, D.C.

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FOREWORD

Lisa Sharon Harper has written a bracing, generative exposition of the elemental narrative of gospel faith. She has done so by sharing the sequence of the "very good" of creation, "the wreckage of the Fall," and the "very good" of the gospel of reconciliation and restoration.

The powerful witness of her book is an antidote to a "thin" reading of the gospel. By thin Harper means a surface reading that settles simply and immediately for what meets the eye and assumes that a quick summary gets it all. Such a reading of the gospel risks reducing it to a package of certitudes without recognition of the depth and mystery of the news. She examines the convenient fundamentalism that has too often given credence to racism and gender violence, and she addresses the progressive church and the flaws of "thin" theology.

Thus, Harper proposes a "thick" reading of the gospel. The notion of "thick description" has an important pedigree that's well worth noting. The phrase was first coined by Gilbert Ryle in his philosophic understanding of the world that refused simple scientific explanatory positivism. The term was taken up by Clifford Geertz in his cultural anthropology. Geertz insisted that conventional social-scientific observation could not possibly grasp—let alone explain—the significance of social symbols and practices in cultures other than our own. George Lindbeck used the term in his resistance to "propositional" or "expressive" theological method as he advocated a "cultural linguistic" approach.

In her book, Harper takes up the awareness of Ryle, Geertz, and Lindbeck and applies it to our discernment of the gospel. There is more to the gospel than meets the eye, so evangelical thought must be patient in its recognition of the inscrutable mystery of the God of the gospel who gives gifts and summons to tasks that do not fit our preconceived categories.

The capacity that Harper exhibits to move from thin to thick in her exposition of the gospel is empowered by

her personal witness of faith and life. She knows firsthand about the racism and gender violence that arise from a thin rendering of the gospel. Indeed, she knows in her own life about the “wreckage of the Fall,” whereby violence is inflicted on one’s neighbors. It took my breath away when I read of her third great-grandmother who was the last adult slave in her family on a plantation in South Carolina. One cannot overestimate the force of the memory and experience of such violence as a context for rereading the gospel.

Her melding of textually informed theology and her experience of violence result in a book that is compellingly thick. Harper addresses the deep wound-producing practices of our society and articulates the costly hope of healing inherent in the gospel. With acute insight, she details the interface between gospel faith and lived reality. The *Very Good Gospel* is a welcome read that invites a rethinking of faith and life that is all too often dumbed down to thin. Thinning our bodies may be good for our physical health, but such thinning of faith is a recipe for chaos and death.

Harper bears witness to the thicker, truer understanding of a saving, transformative, reconciling faith that is indeed “very good.”

Walter Brueggemann

Columbia Theological Seminary

The Very Good Gospel

There must be more to the gospel, I thought.

The gospel. Those words are weighed down with images of Bible-thumping television preachers, white robes, tambourines, street evangelists damning passersby to hell, and lace-collared door-knockers intent on spreading what they call the gospel. The Greek word translated as “gospel” in the Bible is euangelion, meaning “good message.” Today we commonly translate it as “good news.”

When we think of good news, we usually think about something that excites folks. News that makes people want to celebrate. I think of a Facebook post from a good friend who announced that she just got a job. Or the good news that a grant was approved. Or the good news that a nephew was accepted to all three of his top-pick colleges. Woo-hoo! It makes us want to shout, to celebrate. Someone pop the bubbly and turn up the music!

Christians are taught to think of the good news of Jesus Christ in this way: God loves us, but we’re sinful. As a result, we’re separated from God. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. All we have to do is believe that his death was enough and we get to go to heaven.

That’s some good news. Seriously, who wants to languish in hell forever?

But on this particular day, as I walked away from the King Center in Atlanta, one thought haunted me: The good news of my gospel doesn’t feel good enough.

It was the last stop on a pilgrimage taken by select staff from a national college ministry. At the time, I served as the ministry’s director of racial reconciliation in Greater Los Angeles. Over four weeks, the pilgrimage took this diverse group of twenty-five key staff leaders and family members through ten states. We investigated two of the most brutal realities of US history: the Cherokee Trail of Tears and the experiences of Africans on American soil, from antebellum slavery to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

I had been to the King Center just a few months before, so when we arrived on the last day of the pilgrimage, I planned to just mill around while the other group members got their fill. I wandered into the main hall. It all looked like it had when I'd seen it previously until I caught a glimpse of something unfamiliar. Paintings lined the walls. Between each painting a dollar bill was mounted. I was intrigued, so I moved closer. Here was a painting of enslaved people, and in the art they were happy.

What?

I found a plaque on the wall that offered instructions for how to move through the exhibit. It asked the viewer to examine the painting, then try to find that same picture on the dollar bill displayed next to it. I looked closely at the next painting. It was a different scene showing a different enslaved person. This man was carrying a beautiful basket full of cotton, and he was happy. And he had shoes. How strange. Most slaves didn't have shoes.

I could hear the line from an old spiritual born from the misery of plantation life. It declares, "All o' God's chillun got shoes."

For an enslaved person, the differences between being a slave and being a white person were obvious. Whites had freedom of movement and thought, a declaration of their independence, and a Constitution that affirmed their equality. And in addition to all of that, white folk had shoes. Owning shoes represented human dignity. The saying "All o' God's chillun got shoes" seemed harmless to outsiders, but it was a statement of resistance. Having shoes served as a reminder to each member of the enslaved community that you are a child of God. Though the slave master and society do not recognize it, you were born with human dignity. There is a place in God's Kingdom where you have shoes!

So this painting of a happy slave carrying a beautiful basket of cotton while wearing neatly tied shoes struck me as odd. I followed the instructions of the exhibit and found the painting represented on the dollar bill mounted next to it. I moved to the next painting and viewed a scene of an idyllic countryside bursting with cotton. A straight-backed slave family—mother, father, and two children—picked cotton together. They were fully garbed with aprons to protect their clothing, and they all wore shoes.

I examined the dollar bill next to this painting. There was the same happy slave family in the lower-right corner of a ten-dollar note from Charleston, South Carolina. I searched for more information about the exhibit and found a plaque reading "Confederate Currency: The Color of Money."

Dozens of these paintings lined the walls, and displayed between the paintings was actual currency used by the Confederacy. The Confederate States of America put pictures of happy, fully clothed slaves wearing shoes on their money because they knew that the currency traveled around the world. It was southern propaganda in the era before television, tweets, and Facebook.

The King Center also displayed copies of the secession ordinances. The state of Mississippi spelled out its reasons for seceding from the Union: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. . . . A blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization." This helps explain why member states of the Confederacy put slaves on the money they printed. For them, enslaved people equaled money. To lose the people was to lose money—too much to still be able to maintain their way of life.

As I stared at the secession ordinances, I remembered our first stop on the pilgrimage: Dahlonega, Georgia, the site of the first American gold rush. It was Cherokee land and had been for nearly thirteen thousand

years. The Cherokee Nation signed a dozen treaties with the United States between 1795 and 1819 in attempts to protect the land and the people. The 1820s were a time of great promise for the Cherokee Nation.² In that decade the Nation developed its own written syllabary, drafted its own constitution, and established its capital city: New Echota, in Georgia.

But in 1828, a little Cherokee boy found gold. The same year, Georgia began passing laws stripping the Cherokees of their lands and rights. Within years, miners moved in and—without permission—set up camps on Cherokee territory. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which gave him power to negotiate removal treaties with tribes living east of the Mississippi River. At the same time, the state of Georgia divided the Cherokee Nation's land into lots for the miners.

In 1831, the Nation asked the US Supreme Court to grant an injunction against Georgia's punitive laws. The court ruled that it lacked the proper jurisdiction to take the case. A group of missionaries, including Samuel Austin Worcester, later exercised civil disobedience by refusing to obtain a state license to occupy Cherokee lands. In essence, they thumbed their nose at the state's right to rule over Cherokee land. The missionaries were jailed. Cherokee Chief John Ross took their case to the US Supreme Court and won. In *Worcester v. Georgia*, the court ruled that the Cherokee Nation was a sovereign nation. As such, the state of Georgia did not have the right to impose regulations on the Nation; only the federal government had that authority.³

Still, by the end of 1838 and in defiance of the US Supreme Court, President Jackson's coerced treaties had resulted in the removal of nearly forty-six thousand Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole men, women, and children. The illegal deportation cleared twenty-five million acres of land for white settlement, mining, and ultimately slavery.⁴ The US Branch Mint at Dahlonega opened for business and produced its first gold coins the same year.⁵

As I reflected on Dahlonega while standing in front of the Confederate currency exhibit in the King Center, a thought hit me. This is the Bible Belt. These things happened at the hands of people who claimed to believe in Jesus and the power of the Cross for salvation. How could they believe the gospel and do this?

What Is the Gospel?

Two years later I was speaking to a group of college ministry staff. "What is the gospel?" I asked them. This was a particularly provocative question for these staff members, who were expert at communicating the good news of the gospel as it had been handed down to them. They knew all manner of frameworks and diagrams to make the message simple. But beneath the surface of their successful frameworks, a void occupied the center of the message.

What exactly was Jesus's "good news"?

The group formed four teams to examine the New Testament gospels: one examined Mark, another explored Matthew, another dissected Luke, and the last investigated John. They had twenty minutes to discern each gospel writer's understanding of the good news.

When time was up, this diverse group of men and women came back together to share what they had discovered. These accomplished ministry staff members were amazed. The good news of the gospel writers was not quite the good news they had been preaching. The gospel writers' vision was much bigger.

The team members found that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all cared about an individual's reconciliation

with God, self, and their communities. But the gospel writers also focused on systemic justice, peace between people groups, and freedom for the oppressed. The good news was both about the coming of the Kingdom of God and the character of that Kingdom. It was about what God's Kingdom looked like. It was about what citizenship in God's Kingdom requires.

The biblical gospel writers' good news was about the restoration of shalom.

The Divided Gospel

The Second Great Awakening swept over America at the peak of King Cotton's reign in the South. Heightened global demand for cotton collided with the invention of the cotton gin and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Far greater numbers of slaves were needed to pick and process cotton, but Africans were no longer being brought to America. To address the need for more free labor, slave owners began breeding their own slaves.

The slave population in the United States exploded from seven hundred thousand in 1790 to nearly four million by 1860. The impact on gospel proclamation? Charles Finney, the leading revivalist of the nineteenth century, created the altar call to give people the chance to stand up and walk forward, proclaiming that they were aligning themselves with the Kingdom of God. But citizenship in the Kingdom of God, Finney insisted, required allegiance to God's governance over and above any human governance, including the social, legal, and economic institution of slavery.

Men and women confessed and repented of their personal sins as well as their complicity with structural evil. And when they wiped away their tears and opened their eyes, Finney thrust a pen into their hands and pointed them to sign-up sheets for the abolitionist movement. This is what it meant to be an evangelical Christian in the 1800s.

Church historian David Bebbington has identified four characteristics common to American evangelicals during the birthing period of the movement:

1. Conversionism. The belief that all humanity is called by God to move from a state of darkness into light, to be transformed as we convert from living as subjects of the kingdom of this world to living as subjects of the Kingdom of God.
2. Activism. The conviction that it is not enough to believe a particular set of principles or doctrines. Rather, principles and doctrines must transform the way we live. Our faith is kinetic, lived out in the world through our hands and feet.
3. Biblicism. The belief that the Bible is the ultimate authority, period.
4. Crucicentrism. The belief that Jesus's death on the cross stands at the center of our faith. On the cross Jesus died and became sin itself. The transformative power of the Cross offers the world the power to be transformed from sin and death into life.

These characteristics marked the common commitments of evangelicals throughout the nineteenth century. But industrialization in the North produced a new type of inhumane servitude. Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch witnessed the impact of the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the twentieth century. A river of former farmers flowed into poverty-infested tenements in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York City. Men, women, and children—including members of Rauschenbusch's Second German Baptist Church—were forced to work twelve-hour days in horrific conditions. Disease, malnutrition, and death were commonplace.

Rauschenbusch realized the early twentieth-century church had lost its focus on the Kingdom of God. He called out the church's complicity in condoning common rationalizations for the evils of the Industrial Revolution. People were said to be poor because they wanted to be poor or because they lacked strength of

character. Rauschenbusch challenged this thinking:

Single cases of unhappiness are inevitable in our frail human life; but when there are millions of them, all running along well-defined grooves, reducible to certain laws, then this misery is not an individual, but a social matter, due to causes in the structure of our society and curable only by social reconstruction. People didn't want to live in poverty. Rather, members of Rauschenbusch's congregation—and millions of others—were caught in well-defined grooves carved out by oppressive systems, not their own character flaws.

Workers were moving through a systematic assembly line that led to destitution. To combat such widespread injustice, Rauschenbusch called the church to return to the Scriptures. The Scriptures are not silent on structural and systemic sin. The Bible overflows with God's responses to poverty, oppression, and governance.

In response, the small but growing fundamentalist movement rose up in ire, declaring that Rauschenbusch had muddied the gospel message. Fundamentalist Christians argued that the gospel was about one thing only: Christ crucified as payment for our individual sins. Thus began the church's own civil war, which notably took place within the white American church.

The white American church split in two from 1908 through the 1920s. Rauschenbusch's followers were called Modernists (known today as the liberal church). The conservative faction launched the Fundamentalist movement, under the leadership of people such as Cyrus (C. I.) Scofield, whose work is widely known today through the Scofield Bible. The Fundamentalists also founded seminaries, including Dallas Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary.

In the 1940s, a subset of the Fundamentalist movement became known as evangelicals, named after the nineteenth-century movement. However, they didn't adopt the early movement's expansive call for personal and structural repentance. Instead, they maintained a strict Fundamentalist focus on personal repentance from personal imperfection, which led to personal salvation.

Throughout the twentieth century, the liberal church largely distanced itself from calls to personal piety and a passionate, personal relationship with God. Instead, many historic white Protestant churches fought against systemic justice. Some partnered with the historic black church. Others partnered with labor unions to fight the exploitation of labor and were early proponents of women's rights.

Meanwhile, twentieth-century evangelicals took up the cause of evangelism. They spread the good news of personal salvation. And in the latter part of the century, charismatic evangelicals experienced healing encounters with the Spirit of God. A great chasm opened, splitting the gospel in two. On both sides of the divide, the gospel was thinner than before, containing only a fraction of its power and of God's purposes for the world.

Thin Versus Thick Faith

Gospel tracts, simple diagrams, and fill-in-the-blank studies have created what theologian Miroslav Volf calls "thin faith."¹⁰ Thin religion lacks deep roots in the Scriptures and Christian traditions. It skims the surface of sacred texts, using what seems applicable in the moment without connecting the dots. To overcome thin faith, Christians need to study Scripture in light of the writers' historic and cultural contexts, the original meanings of words, and the biblical text in the context of the teachings of church fathers

and mothers. It requires serious study and reflection.

In contrast, thin faith rests on “what my pastor said” or “what this Bible passage says to me” (without contextual study), or it doesn’t reference sacred texts at all. Thin faith creates its own collection of Instagram memes that serve as life principles. One’s personal point of view becomes the highest authority. Because thin faith lacks roots, it can be swept away, manipulated, and even marginalized so that it has no bearing on the private or public lives of the faithful. Witness politicians who claim faith when they are trying to get elected. If they have only a vague idea of what the sacred texts actually say, their post-election decisions are likely to bear little resemblance to thick faith.

For more than a century now, thinned-out faith has left the divided American church struggling to grasp the significance of the prophetic voices among us. It also has left us without the biblical foundations needed to comprehend Kingdom theology. What we need is a thicker approach to the central question of our faith: what is the good news of the gospel?

Shalom

The word shalom in all of its forms appears frequently in the Bible. It is used 550 times.

The five forms of the word are as follows:

- shalom, a Hebrew noun that means peace and wholeness—used 225 times.
- shalem, a Hebrew verb that means to make right and to restore—used 117 times.
- shelem, a Hebrew noun that means peace offering—used 87 times.
- shalem, also a Hebrew adjective that means loyal or devoted—used 27 times.
- eirene, a Greek noun that means peace—used 94 times.

Thin faith creates its own collection of Instagram memes that serve as life principles.

In Scripture, the word shalom itself means

- well-being
- wholeness
- the perfection of God’s creation
- abundance
- peace

It is used as a greeting that wishes right relationships in community for the recipient of the blessing (see Genesis 29:6; 2 Kings 4:26; Jeremiah 15:5). It also is used to bless the dying with a charge to “go to your ancestors” (Genesis 15:15; see 1 Kings 2:6) and as a promise of safe passage and safe conduct (see Judges 18:6; Psalm 4:8).

Shalom describes the absence of conflict (see Deuteronomy 2:26; Isaiah 33:7) and is used in the context of prophecies of salvation for the vulnerable and condemnation for the unjust (see Jeremiah 6:14; Micah 3:5; Zechariah 9:10). It also is used in the contexts of prayer and politics (see Psalm 72:7; 85:8, 10).

In the New Testament, the Greek form of shalom (eirene) is used ninety-four times and means restoration of relationship, wholeness, healing, and peace. A word used in Matthew 5:9, eireneopios, means “those who do peace” or shalom doers.

Luke 1:79 speaks of a “way of peace”—an ethic of eirene.

John 14:26–27 contrasts eirene and fear.

Acts 9:31 reveals that *eirene* is for all people (Judea, Galilee, and Samaria). *Shalom* living involves the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit and leads to church growth.

Paul uses *eirene* in all his letters, and the word is used in all but one of the remainder of the New Testament epistles.

While the word *shalom* is not used in Genesis 1 or 2, these chapters give us two of the most vivid pictures of *shalom* in Scripture. In these texts, we see one of the central concepts of *shalom*—we are all connected—lived out.

The peace of self is dependent upon the peace of the other. God created the world in a web of relationships that overflowed with forceful goodness. These relationships are far-reaching: between humanity and God, between humanity and self, between genders, between humanity and the rest of creation, within families, between ethnic groups or races, and between nations. These relationships were “very good” in the beginning. One word characterized them all: *shalom*. Then the story of the Fall (see Genesis 3) explains how the relationships were broken.

The rest of Scripture takes us on a journey toward redemption and restoration.

Shalom is the stuff of the Kingdom. It’s what the Kingdom of God looks like in context. It’s what citizenship in the Kingdom of God requires and what the Kingdom promises to those who choose God and God’s ways to peace.

To live in God’s Kingdom, in the way of *shalom*, requires that we discard our thin understanding of the gospel. I had to face a hard truth: my limited, evangelical understanding of the gospel had nothing to say about sixteen thousand Cherokees and four other sovereign indigenous nations whose people were forcibly removed from their lands. And it had nothing to say to my own ancestors who were enslaved in South Carolina.

My personal pilgrimage has continued for thirteen years. In that time, I have been working out my understanding of *shalom* and its implications for my life, my practice of the gospel, and my work as a Christian justice advocate. I have preached, trained, and written. I have organized faith communities to fight various manifestations of oppression and brokenness. In previous books and lectures, I have explored the significance of *shalom* when it is brought to bear on public policy and the common good. I also have preached and written on *shalom* and the problems of shame, family brokenness, domestic abuse, and global witness. I have come to understand a few things that will be fleshed out in the chapters that follow:

1. If one’s gospel falls mute when facing people who need good news the most—the impoverished, the oppressed, and the broken—then it’s no gospel at all.
2. *Shalom* is what the Kingdom of God smells like. It’s what the Kingdom looks like and what Jesus requires of the Kingdom’s citizens. It’s when everyone has enough. It’s when families are healed. It’s when shame is renounced and inner freedom is laid hold of. It’s when human dignity, bestowed by the image of God in all humanity, is cultivated, protected, and served in families, faith communities, and schools and through public policy. *Shalom* is when the capacity to lead is recognized in every human being and when nations join together to protect the environment.
3. At its heart, the biblical concept of *shalom* is about God’s vision for the emphatic goodness of all relationships. In his book *Peace*, Walter Brueggemann wrote, “The vision of wholeness, which is the supreme will of the biblical God, is the outgrowth of a covenant of *shalom* (see Ezekiel 34:25), in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with none to

make them afraid.”

So what is the vision? What was God’s original intent for our world and all the relationships within it? What did God call good? What is the goodness that God is working to restore?

As we begin this journey to live in the shalom of God’s Kingdom, I remember the words of my former pastor Dr. Ron Benefiel at the Los Angeles First Church of the Nazarene. He would stand before the congregation on Sunday morning and say, “I’m just a beggar, sharing with other beggars where I’ve found food.”

Well, I’ve found food. Want some?

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George Finch:

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Steven Williams:

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Richard Strohm:

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