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# Shalom Much More Than Just Peace

ANTHONY PRETE



Closing plenary address  
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Anthony Prete** is a member of Central Philadelphia (PA) Monthly Meeting. He describes his studies of the Bible in the following words:

“Although I studied the Bible as part of my training in a Catholic seminary, I began to take it seriously only about 15 years ago, when I attended a series of conferences that made me aware of modern biblical scholarship, which was a big contrast to my traditional education in the seminary. Another powerful influence has been the Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann, my mentor and friend, who combines investigation with a social conscience. I sincerely believe that if we acquire a right understanding of the Bible, it can teach us Friends a great deal. My hope is to be able to use this understanding as a way of counteracting the lack of interest—and even occasional hostility—that some liberal Friends show toward the Bible.”

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is alive and well. Such are the experiences that convinced the people of the Bible that their God had a hand in their lives. Why should it be any different for us?

Let us, then, in partnership with God, help restore shalom to the world by taking on the practice of lament.

## SHALOM: MUCH MORE THAN JUST PEACE

I begin with two queries: *To what extent might our opposition to war be diverting us from addressing the conditions that create war?* And: *To what extent might our dedication to social activism be preventing us from utilizing God's role in social change?*

Over the years, as I've delved more deeply into the Scriptures, I have increasingly found Quaker convictions expressed and endorsed there. One example is the Hebrew word shalom. As I came to uncover its broad and rich biblical meaning, I recognized that it mirrors what George Fox described as "that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars."

Most people understand shalom to mean "peace" in the sense of "the absence of conflict." While correct, this reflects the end result of biblical shalom, not the substance. To get at the substance of shalom, we have to begin with the verb, since Hebrew is primarily a language of action, not of concepts, a language that favors the dynamic over the static.

This much is clear: shalom, no matter how casual its use, is tied directly to justice. Even in biblical times, the slogan was true: "No Justice, No Peace." We'll see just how true as we unpack the range of meanings that shalom has in the biblical text. We begin with the verb, with the action of "doing shalom."

In concrete, everyday use, the verb form of shalom means "to pay." This payment is not a gift or a favor, but is an obligation arising out of an agreement you and I might enter. Such an agreement demands a relationship of trust. We must be willing to trust each other and to respect what that trust requires, otherwise one of us might ignore or distort our obligations. When we fulfill those obligations, we are doing shalom.

The Bible also uses shalom as a legal term. In the Book of Exodus, the section following the Ten Commandments includes lots of concrete applications. Among them are 14 practical rules

about losing, stealing, or damaging someone else's property.

Here's the first one:

If someone leaves a pit open, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restitution, giving money to the animal's owner, but keeping the dead animal (Exod. 21:33–34).

The Hebrew word that is translated “shall make restitution” is the verb form of shalom. Here the issue is not so much relationship as responsibility—like the sign you might see today in pottery shops: “You break it, you bought it.” Put another way, if I cause you loss, I'm obliged to make good for what I've destroyed or taken. Again, I'm not doing you a favor, or acting out of the goodness of my heart. I'm doing what justice demands. That, too, is doing shalom.

So, when the Bible uses shalom as a verb, it's talking about holding up my side of an agreement, or making restitution if I have deprived you of something that is rightfully yours—even if I did it unknowingly or by mistake. Both these uses involve tangible, precise actions—actions that produce or restore an element of equilibrium.

As a noun, shalom has the basic meaning of “sufficiency.” Again, the context is concrete. The sufficiency involves food, shelter, clothing, land, or work. It also includes the feeling of being satisfied because one's legitimate desires have been met. Note that I said desires, not needs. Biblical shalom is not sufficiency in the sense of having just enough to get by. It is sufficiency on a grander scale. It is sufficiency in the face of abundance, not sufficiency in the face of scarcity.

We need to acknowledge, of course, that today shalom as “sufficiency on a grand scale” is a long way off. Who among us is not aware, as we look around the world, that even in the face of abundance, sufficiency is in short supply? You know the numbers: on planet Earth, 80 percent of the goods and services

represent the consistent biblical witness. Yes, the Israelites sometimes experienced a God who did not protect them from the consequences of their actions. But the God they experienced on a regular basis was “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abiding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” It was the God of abundance who, from the very beginning, invited the earth to bring forth every type of food, invited the earthlings to increase and multiply, and assured that there was enough for all.

So the experience underlying the confidence that gave rise to the lament is an experience of goodness. Except the Israelites didn't know “goodness”—it was much too abstract a term for them or their language. They knew “good,” the concrete, palpable good—the same as God called things “good” throughout the days of creation, and “very good” at the end of the sixth. The experience of God's good things provides the confidence that makes the lament possible.

If we are to have confidence that our laments can engage God in resolving the inequities of the world, do we not need the same experience of God's goodness, reflected concretely in the things around us? And how is that possible in a world racked with pollution, armed conflict, hunger, disease, poverty, exploitation, lying, and greed?

Look around you—yes, literally look around you. Do you not see the goodness? Look at what is good in the world: people caring for each other and for the Earth, the incredible rightness of a twirling seed that grows into a tree, of a baby's ear, of microcosmic molecules mirroring the movement of the universe (and the other way around). Look at people sitting vigil next to hospital beds, or speaking softly in the face of rage, or lending a hand when disaster strikes.

The biblical message is that none of this is random, none of it preordained. It is the visible reflection of a good and caring God who acts in and through creation, evidence that shalom

in the over 50 psalms of lament, is that God hears and acts. Each of these psalms has two elements: plea, and praise. At some point, the one who is pleading suddenly starts praising God for answering the plea. The text does not tell us the nature of this transformation, that is, what happens at this liminal moment when celebration replaces sorrow. But whatever it is, it happens with such regularity that—allowing for the mystery of faithfulness and freedom—we cannot deny a strong element of certainty.

In the biblical lament, the speaker is convinced that God will act. Where does this conviction come from? It comes from a source that Friends hold most precious: experience. The Bible expresses the gathered experiences of the faithful—experiences like being freed from slavery in Egypt and being fed each day in the wilderness. The Israelites preserved these experiences not as museum pieces but as working models that guided and gave meaning to their current experiences—even to the point where the present was recast in the form of the past, or the past was altered to illuminate the present.

Each of these experiences evidenced God's active presence. As the experiences multiplied over generations, patterns began emerging. Eventually the Israelites discerned the characteristics of God's acts, which they expressed in a core conviction—just as Friends express the core conviction of “that of God in everyone.” The Israelites described God's enduring characteristics as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abiding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” These convictions echo throughout the Old Testament. They are the leitmotif of Israel's faith, the certainty against which all circumstances are measured.

You may find such an expression quaintly positive and optimistic—especially if you've suffered a barrage of Old Testament fire-and-brimstone stories, tales of a vengeful God and a violent Israel. The stories are there, but they do not

are consumed by 20 percent of the people.

Look at it this way: suppose that tomorrow morning at breakfast here at the Gathering, with all 1,600 of us lined up at our various dining halls, someone walks down each line and taps every fifth person. These 320 Friends get to eat 80 percent of the food—if there's 3,000 pancakes, they get to eat 2,400 of them—about seven-and-a-half apiece, a lot—but these Friends are big eaters. When they're finished, the remaining 1,280 Friends are allowed in and are served the remaining 20 percent of the food—less than half a pancake each, hardly a healthy start to their day.

The Bible proclaims a conviction of abundance, not a conviction of scarcity—and offers powerful examples of both. For scarcity, we have the Genesis story of Pharaoh, the original inside trader. Tipped off by Joseph that after seven years of plenty the bottom will fall out of the grain market, Pharaoh panics. Though arguably the richest person in the world, he spends the seven good years creaming off one-fifth of every grain harvest from every field in Egypt—so driven is he by the prospect of not having enough.

When the crash comes, the Egyptians have plenty of grain—enough for seven-and-a-half pancakes each, every morning. But to get their own grain back, they have to buy it. For those without money, the grain is not available. What's more, Pharaoh has a monopoly, so he can ratchet up the price as much as he wants. Where shared abundance could have saved everyone, scarcity starts taking its toll, as some go hungry and others fill the Pharaoh's coffers with their money.

After the first year, the money runs out. Does Pharaoh decide to give the grain back to the people he took it from? He does not. His conviction of scarcity will not allow that. So the people are forced to hand over their livestock in exchange for grain. Then the livestock runs out; what else can they sell?

Genesis tells us their wrenching decision: “Buy us and our land in exchange for food” (Gen. 47:19). Pharaoh now owns their money, their livestock, their land, and their bodies—all in exchange for the grain he commandeered from them in the first place. So we’re not surprised to read, two verses later: “As for the people, Pharaoh made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other” (Gen. 47:21).

From scarcity to slavery—it’s a recurring story, reverberating down the centuries. Greed creates scarcity, thrives on scarcity, celebrates scarcity. Why else do we have today a government that keeps people shackled to crumbling cities through an economic system that fawns on the wealthy? Why else do we have an entrepreneurial empire that feeds off scarcity, and media that sell scarcity? The answer: because those who control the government, the economy, the stores, and the television sets are the true believers in scarcity. And that leaves 80 percent to consume 20 percent—take your half a pancake and shut up. The age of the pharaohs continues.

There is no peace in that, no sufficiency, no balance, no shalom. It is—as George Fox so keenly observed—the occasion from which wars come. Those who have, keep on taking; those who have not, lose the little they have. If the losers do not take up arms, the takers will.

The God of the Bible offers a different scenario. It, too, begins in Egypt, but the real action occurs in the wilderness—where survival depends on sharing. A band of escaped slaves, led by a rebel Egyptian, has been trudging through the desert for about six weeks when food runs out. The ragtag crew takes out its frustration on Moses, accusing him of bringing them out there just to kill them. But their God, Yahweh, has a solution—and a proviso. Yahweh will cause bread to fall every morning, Moses is told, but they are to collect only enough for the day.

The next morning, the ground is covered with a fine, flaky

what you have felt.

To speak with such conviction you don’t have to be a victim yourself. But you do have to get close enough to the victims so that some of their pain rubs off on you, gets into your pores, is imprinted on your mind. Only then can you speak with the voice of a victim, and your speech will have conviction as it demands God’s attention and God’s help.

Conviction lies at the heart of every protest and every march and every petition. It may not be evident to the people around you, or if it is, they may judge it naive or bizarre. But it will be evident to God, and that is where its ultimate effectiveness lies. Whether we lament with words or with actions, as part of a marching crowd or sitting alone in our room, if we speak to God with conviction, God listens.

God listens. But will God act? The Bible has no certain answer to that question. It can’t. It can’t, first of all, because we’re talking about two parties, God and the lamenter, each of whom, in its own way, is a mystery that defies prediction. It can’t also because prayer is a dialogue, and no one can say where a true dialogue will lead. It can’t, finally, because God is both faithful and free. If God always answered, how could God remain free? If God never answered, how could God remain faithful? This is a mystery we must live with, just as we live with the mystery at the core of every relationship.

Sometimes God does not act. In the Book of Jeremiah, the people lament but God is unmoved, recognizing that their motive is not trust but a self-serving sense of entitlement that renders hollow even their prayer of repentance (14:1–10). Psalm 88, a textbook example of genuine lament, ends in darkness, not deliverance. And as perhaps the most poignant example, the entire Book of Lamentations shows no indication that God has heard or done anything.

But those are exceptions. The Bible’s consistent witness,

God, a God who holds us earthling human partners in high esteem, will not violate our freedom, will not intrude unbidden into our lives. This is a profound limitation self-imposed by God on God. The same God who ardently desires our fulfillment, our happiness, our security, who offers abundance, who can calm the chaos—this God will not right our wrongs, cure our ills, fix our mistakes, clean up our messes unless beckoned into our lives. The biblical witness is consistent: God acts when God is called upon to act, and the more this call is honest, direct, specific, and demanding, the more likely God is to intervene.

We, then, are God's catalyst. We are the flame that ignites the fuse, the switch that turns on the light, the key that opens the door. The words of Isaiah are true: "we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (64:8). But as any skilled potter will attest, the potter responds to the clay even as the clay responds to the potter.

What, then, shall we do with this power that the potter allots to us? I put it to you that we must use it to bring about shalom—for ourselves and for everyone we are led to represent. We do it because we long for the time when hunger has been so satisfied and fear has been so relieved that the wolf and lamb can lie down together (Isa. 11:6). We do it by bringing scarcity before God, by presenting it in all its particular horror, pain, stench, and ugliness and saying: "Here, you need to fix this."

All the biblical laments share an essential characteristic: conviction. Their words are a cry from the heart, expressing a deep-down pain, a gnawing need, a shameful degradation—and a conviction that God will alleviate it. Without that conviction, their words would be empty and nothing would change.

If it is true that all of us are called to be surrogate lamenters, then our path is clear: tell what you know about the pain that scarcity inflicts on the peoples of the world—indeed, on the very world itself. Tell what you have experienced. Tell

substance. It's the bread, Moses explains, and he tells them about God's proviso. They agree. The text reads: "They gathered as much as each of them needed" (Exod. 16:21).

*As much as each of them needed.* Can you imagine how difficult that must have been? They were so hungry that slavery in Egypt looked good by comparison. Now they're being asked to trust that each day will bring a new supply. Unlike Pharaoh's granaries, the supply will not run out. Instead of money and livestock, their currency is trust, trust that there will always be enough. And they manage to pull it off. Each day, they have as much as they need—they have sufficiency, they have shalom.

When this manna story is retold and reinterpreted in the New Testament, the outcome is just as amazing: a deserted place, a hungry crowd—this time 5,000-plus women and children—and just five loaves and two fishes. But the meager food is distributed, and whether by miracle or by neighborly generosity, all ate, the text tells us, and were filled. What's more, the leftovers filled 12 baskets. Scarcity transformed into abundance. Shalom reaffirmed once again.

The biblical word shalom, which we've just explored, extends from its basic meanings to a cluster of additional meanings. For the verb, the basic meaning was "to pay" and "to make reparation." Other meanings for shalom as a verb are: to restore, to finish, to heal, to reward. All of these involve answering the obligation to meet a neighbor's need. All are works of justice.

The same justice lies at the root of the noun, shalom. Its primary meaning was "sufficiency"—everyone having what they need, and trusting that their needs will continue to be met. The noun encompasses even more than the verb: completeness, soundness, welfare, safety, health, prosperity, quiet, tranquility, contentment.

They sound wonderful, don't they—these translations of shalom? They express the peace that many of us dream of

achieving. But is it really peace that we seek, or just peace of mind? Is our peace grounded in justice, or perhaps just in politeness or civility or political correctness? If we seek it because it extends the benefits of abundance, because it stems the spread of scarcity, because it sides with those who are deprived of sufficiency, who are left holding empty promises worth no more than yesterday's lottery ticket, whose homes and possessions and bodies have been stolen, damaged, or destroyed—then yes, “coming to peace” is indeed coming to shalom.

But “peace”—be it world peace or our own peace and quiet—that is sought without regard for the demands of justice, that is obtained without being measured against sufficiency for others—or worse, at the expense of their sufficiency—such a peace, however inviting, is not shalom. No justice, no peace.

Shalom is something we do, not something we feel. It does not come just from being nice to each other, or accepting each other, or forgiving and encouraging each other. Shalom comes from exercising justice toward each other, and for many of us that means going beyond our family and friends, going instead to our brothers and sisters who do not have sufficiency, whose needs are not met, whose agreements are broken, whose possessions are taken and not returned. Only when we can say we have tried to right these wrongs, to reject the mentality of scarcity that they spring from and replace it with a mentality of abundance that is for all to enjoy—only then can we say we are coming to shalom.

Additional evidence of the link between shalom and justice appears in the Bible's directives for the Jubilee year—found in the 25th chapter of Leviticus. Held every 50th year, the Jubilee was the time to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants” (v. 10). During Jubilee, debts were forgiven, property restored, the needy cared for, and the indentured laborers set free. All these were acts of justice, and

lament but cannot say it. You need to be their representative, their surrogate, their advocate. That's what it means to be a part of a faith community, of the human family, and yes, of the Earth itself. This is not a choice, it is an obligation arising out of the demands of justice. Indeed, it goes directly to the source of justice, God, and can set that source in motion. It is the obligation that qualifies us for the gift of shalom.

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#### L A M E N T S

Most of the biblical laments are in the Book of Psalms. Among the more powerful personal laments are Pss. 7, 10, 13, 22, 25, 38, 42, 54, 55, 57, 59, 70, 71, 86, 88, 120, and 130. Others include Pss. 3-6, 17, 26, 28, 31, 35, 43, 51, 61, 102, 109, and 140-143. Communal laments are fewer: Pss. 74, 80, 85, 123, as well as 12, 60, 83, 90, 94, and 137. In the Book of Lamentations, all five chapters are a cry for God to come and look on the destroyed city of Jerusalem—a poignant testament to Israel's faith, because God remains absent. For a contemporary expression of personal lament, see *Psalms of Lament*, by the poet Ann Weems, written after her son was killed at age 21.

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The lament testifies to a peculiar thing about the God of the Bible. Forget all you were ever told about God knowing everything. This God needs to be told. Before this God can intervene, the person suffering—or their representative—needs to tell God what is wrong, needs to make a case, needs to plead a cause. That's what the biblical text says, time and time again. The pain must be spoken, articulated, given palpable shape and form in words. Only then, it seems, can God do anything about it.

This means that God is not God spontaneously, unilaterally. When God does act, it is because of a dialogue, because the gaunt face of suffering has grabbed God's attention—frequently with coarse language—and demanded God's help.

What's happening here is the playing out of a relationship, a covenant. Remember the Creation story: this God is a relational

moving shalom to the center and protecting it from whatever threatens its position or stifles its expressions.

God can do that, but God does not. God does not awaken shalom in their hearts. God does not free them from this allegiance to scarcity. God does not stay their hand as they take what they ought to pay for, walk away from what they have destroyed or damaged, replace sufficiency with starvation. In all this, God does nothing.

What kind of God does nothing in the face of such injustice? Who wants such a God? A God who is cold and callous and indifferent, who doesn't seem to notice what is going on—the pain, the persecution, the sickness, the hunger, the homelessness, the tens of thousands who die of AIDS every year? How can God remain so distant, so unhearing, so uninterested, while these atrocities go on, unabated?

These questions are not mine, they are the Bible's questions. The place you will find them is in the biblical prayers known as laments. And I propose these laments—or others like them—as a way of doing the work of justice so that we can come to peace.

The lament is a form of prayer so daring and frightening and demanding that it doesn't come easy to our lips. It is a protest, hurled not in the face of some jackboot tyrant but defiantly in the face of God. The lament is not the prayer of the timid, a beggar holding out a bowl and appealing to divine pity. The lament uses language that is bold, graphic, and unvarnished. It blurts out what the lamenter is suffering and how God should be responding. The lament gives voice to pain, abuse, isolation, and oppression—dumps it all in God's lap and says, "There! Now do something about it!"

Many of us may not need the lament; our problems might not seem serious enough to risk calling God on the carpet for them. If that's true of you, pay attention: it is precisely you who need to be the voice of those who are desperate for the

the beneficiaries experienced shalom. Biblical shalom is not something one attains for oneself; it is bestowed by another—just as when we leave this Gathering with a deeper sense of coming to peace, we have not ourselves but each other to thank.

That, then, is what I see the Bible saying about shalom. It is the flower that blooms only on the tree of justice, planted near the waters of abundance, warmed by the light of truth and faithfulness.

I started with two queries: To what extent might our opposition to war be diverting us from addressing the conditions that create war? And: To what extent might our dedication to social activism be preventing us from utilizing God's role in social change? I hope that my comments about shalom shed some light on the first. Now I turn to the second.

In the Scriptures, the opposite of shalom is not war, it is chaos. I don't mean the chaos of string-theory enthusiasts or traffic jams or a teenager's bedroom. Biblical chaos is the condition that existed before creation. And biblical creation is the taming of chaos so that abundance can abound and shalom can blossom.

For the ancient peoples, chaos was a constant threat. Without warning, forces of confusion, diminishment, and destruction could strike, bringing individual difficulty, social strife, or even the collapse of the cosmic order. Shalom was the alternative to chaos, a refuge from its frightening specter and a bulwark that kept it at bay.

The foundation for Israel's assurance that shalom would overcome chaos is in the opening pages of the Bible, the seven-day account of Creation (Gen. 1:1–2:3).

This is a highly crafted text, with significance in every word. The Hebrew begins with a 19-word convoluted sentence that takes up the first two verses. Don't let the English translation fool you; this is a tough sentence to untangle. It says that when

God started creating, there already existed the heavens, the world, and something called the “deep.” The world, we’re told, is *tohu vabohu*—an expression whose meaning is unsure because it appears elsewhere only in Jeremiah 4:23, where it refers back to the pre-creation condition. Many translations say “waste and void,” but more to the point might be “a shapeless mess.” The “deep” is water, but from a fish’s point of view—everywhere you look. The only harbinger of hope is God’s *ruah* (“breath” or “wind” or “spirit”) hovering or trembling over the deep.

The overall picture is chaos, and not just in the words—the sentence itself is chaotic. But the next sentence marks the beginning of chaos conquered. It has just four words, two of them repeated as a single word: literally “Said God happen light light-happen.” With exquisite simplicity and directness, the text tells us that God has started to take charge. The next sentence also has just four words, two from the sentence before: “Saw God light good.” And the final sentence: “Separated God light from darkness.” The first boundary is drawn; calm is edging out chaos.

The powerful God is taming the chaos; that much is clear. But many ancient religions claimed their gods conquered chaos. The key is in how, and here the Hebrew is clear: in each creative act, God does not command, God invites—“let there be” is an offer, not an order. Chaos is conquered because God calls and something responds. Partnerships are being called forth.

The first thing to notice, then, is that God conquers chaos by sharing power. The second is that God invites this creation to be abundantly self-sustaining—and it accepts. Sky, dry land, sea—all start to bring forth life. The sixth day is reserved for creatures that “have the breath of life”—the animals, then the earthling (for that is the meaning of the Hebrew word *adam*).

First God creates them “in God’s image,” which means they are to do as God does: overcome chaos. Next God tells

them: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and protect it [not ‘subdue it’], and care for [not ‘have dominion over’]... every living thing that moves upon the earth.” It sounds like a command, but the text calls it a blessing, which means it’s an affirmation of the earthlings’ role and responsibility to carry on the divine defense against chaos. Finally, God gives the earthlings everything that is growing on the earth for their food.

What’s happening here? Where there was chaos there is now order. Because of that order, there is enough for everyone: the God of abundance guarantees sufficiency, and in doing so, guarantees shalom.

The story puts God back in charge, assuring partnership and abundance. This means we can cross off our list of worries the words “lack of”—lack of this, lack of that. There is enough, and it’s under our control; sufficiency and satisfaction—double shalom! And that is what we wish when we greet each other with “Shalom.”

But for those who believe in scarcity—who worship a god of Scarcity—the words “lack of” stay at the top of their list. This is no accident; it is the consequence of a carefully tended ideology, born of governmental greed, entrepreneurial engorgement, and military might. Convinced that there is not enough to go around, these disciples of scarcity scramble and scheme to “get theirs,” as much “theirs” as they can, more than they need because “one never knows”—though they do know they will leave others without enough.

These purveyors of power—be they political, economic, military, psychological, or religious—have let domination, greed, and self-righteousness shove shalom into a dark corner of their hearts. And it seems that nothing we say or do can dislodge it. We strive to subvert their domination, or shame their greed, or expose their self-righteousness, but we cannot coax their shalom out of the shadows. Only God can rearrange the human heart,