



Embracing Shalom

Moving into Fullness of Life

By Grace Tazelaar

She had the life I always dreamed of - a loving husband, three children and a dog, a beautiful home in the suburbs, a vibrant church family. She had a Christian heritage and a deep relationship with God grew more intimate and personal. She prepared healthy meals and snacks for her family, exercised regularly, and made sure she got adequate rest. She regularly visited the dentist and doctor to maintain her health. She had done everything we in the health professions say people should do to stay healthy. Her life represented everything that I understood the concept of *shalom* to be - reconciled to God, to self, to others and to creation.

Shalom is a common greeting in the Middle East, often translated as peace. However, the Hebrew word, *shalom*, means more than just the absence of strife. Nicholas Wolterstorff suggests that we must add the ideas of justice, harmony and enjoyment to capture the full biblical meaning of the word. “*Shalom* means just relationship (living justly and experiencing justice), harmonious relationships and enjoyable relationships. *Shalom* means belonging

to an authentic and nurturing community, in which one can be one’s true self and give one’s self away without becoming poor. Justice, harmony and enjoyment of God, self, others and nature; this is the *shalom* that Jesus brings, the peace that passes all understanding”¹

Throughout my nursing career, I have sought to promote health and justice. The concept of *shalom* embraces both. What does it mean to Christian nursing practice to promote *shalom*? It includes identifying spiritual needs and providing spiritual care.

RECONCILIATION WITH GOD

The first element of *shalom* is reconciliation with God. Our ability to have a personal relationship with God is affected by three things: our view of God, our view of ourselves, and our understanding of Jesus Christ. We all have a universal need for a meaningful relationship with God. Over the years, I have found these three things helpful in assessing people’s spiritual condition.

A healthy view of God includes understanding that he is loving, and that he desires to have a relationship with us. John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”* But we also must understand that God is perfectly holy, that is, without sin (Revelation 15:3-4). God is also perfectly just. He cannot tolerate anything less than perfection (Matthew 5:48).

Exploring how people view God may reveal why they have an inadequate personal relationship with him. Those who come from abusive families may have difficulty understanding God’s love because they may never have experienced a loving relationship. On the other hand, some people flippantly speak of God as “the man upstairs” and show little appreciation for God’s holiness and justice. They do not understand God as the creator of the universe – as their creator. They think “I’m not all that bad”, and think God’s standard is reduced to theirs. They do not appreciate the serious nature of sin.

They do not realize that just as one drop of typhoid in a glass of drinking water contaminates the whole glass, so one sin contaminated all of creation.

God’s love and holiness present a dilemma. Although God made us in his own image (Genesis 1:27) to love us, to have a relationship with us and to bring glory to himself, we live in rebellion to God. Our disobedience is an obstacle that we cannot overcome, one that keeps us from enjoying a relationship with him (Romans 3:23). Because God is perfectly just, he must punish sin. Guilty of disobedience, we are under the just sentence of death and eternal separation from God’s love (Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23).

Without the intervention of Jesus Christ, our situation would be hopeless. Understanding who Jesus is and what he accomplished is so important to having a real relationship with God. Some see Jesus as merely an historical figure, a good man or one of the prophets. But the truth is that Jesus is God incarnate (I John 4:14). He is holy, perfect and sinless.

God sent Jesus, to live a sinless life so that he could pay the price for our disobedience and break the curse that hangs over all humankind. Jesus did this by his death on the cross. God accepted Jesus’ death as payment for our sin, which was evidenced by him raising him from the dead. Jesus’ death and resurrection provided the way for us to come into a personal relationship with God. In raising

Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated his power over death and imparts that power to us through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). His conquest of death assures us that our relationship with God is an eternal one (Romans 5:8; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 4:10).

It is dangerous to interpret who God is by our circumstances, instead of interpreting our circumstances by the constant of God’s excellent moral character.

Christ is the only way that we can have a personal relationship with God. To refuse that is to dishonor the supreme sacrifice that Jesus made for us. Jesus said, *“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works”* (John 14:10). People teach that all roads lead to God, that a person can follow Mohammed or Buddha or any other religious system and still go to heaven. God’s word teaches that the only way to heaven and to an eternal, personal relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.

It is remarkable that God loved us enough to provide Christ to pay for our sin. And all this

while we were living in disobedience and rebellion to him. Christ's death is a free gift to us. Nothing we have done or can do makes us deserving of this magnificent love gift (Ephesians 2:8-9). We simply have to turn to him by acknowledging that we have disobeyed God, and by believing that Jesus is God's son and that his death paid the penalty for our sin (Romans 10:19).

RECONCILIATION WITH SELF

If she represented the epitome of shalom, why did she die of cancer? My beautiful younger sister, whom I looked after, with whom I had played, in whose wedding I had served as maid of honor, with whom I had shared the miraculous birth of her first daughter, my first niece, died at age forty-six of inoperable cancer. My mother asked, "Why is God taking her when she has so much to live for Why doesn't he take me instead?"

We all ask "Why?" at some point in our lives. It is evidence of our need for meaning and purpose. Everyone wants to believe that their lives have made a difference, that they have contributed in some way to the world around them. In times of disaster or calamity, we look for reasons "Why?". We ask, "Why am I here?" or "Why did this happen to me?" at critical times in our lives, times of transition or re-evaluation or confusion. Naturally, when we face an uncertain future or death, "Why?" becomes a nagging question.

Asking "Why?" is normal. How we respond to that question is determined by our relationship with God. Some people get bitter and angry with God, blaming him for not stepping in and preventing a painful situation or intervening in some way. They may think, "If God is so good and all powerful, why did he allow this to happen to me? Why didn't God do something?" Or they may ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" The danger is that we begin to interpret who God is by our circumstances, instead of interpreting our circumstances by the constant of

God's excellent and loving moral character. When we make that mistake, as we all do from time to time, it hurts our relationship with God.

The kind of love God wants us to enjoy is unconditional, unwarranted love - love that is given in spite of faults, undesirable traits or poverty.

The book of Job is dedicated to the problem of why God allows good people to suffer. Psalm 73 also contemplates why it seems that the righteous suffer while the wicked flourish. We continue to ask "Why?" because the Bible really doesn't give us a definitive answer. When God finally spoke to Job, he did not say, "I allowed this to happen so I could prove to Satan that you are a faithful servant," even though the book of Job opens with a dialogue between God and Satan that would seem to indicate this might be the reason. Instead God said to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding" (Job 38:4). In essence, God is saying, "Who do you think you are? Who made you, anyway?" We are referred back to what we know about God's character and our relationship with him. Never let circumstances redefine what you know to be true about God.

A positive response to the "Why?" question can lead us to a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with him. When we acknowledge that God is the creator of the universe, that God created us to have a real relationship with him and to bring honor and glory to him, God redeems the pain and suffering that is in the world because of sin. God guides us into a greater appreciation and knowledge of who he is. By focusing on God's character and attributes: his holiness, justice, love, the fact that he never changes and is all-powerful and all-knowing, we recognize who he is. We also realize our own

shortcomings and our need for the provision of his son, Jesus Christ, as the only way we can ever have a relationship with God.

When Jesus arose and later ascended to heaven, God provided us with the hope of eternal life with him. In the midst of Job's suffering, he claims the promise of eternal fellowship with God when he says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth." (Job 19:25).

The search for meaning and purpose can lead us to a bigger, eternal perspective on life and help us grow spiritually. When we ask "Why?" in a questioning way, we impose our finite, flawed sense of justice on an infinite, holy creator. By God's grace, the Holy Spirit opens our eyes in the midst of those dark times to reveal the holy, just, loving creator God. He redeems the effects of our sinful nature, extends his grace, mercy and peace to us, strengthens and deepens our relationship with him, and promises the hope of eternal life with him if we accept the gift of salvation through his son, Jesus Christ.

RECONCILIATION WITH FELLOW HUMANS

Shalom not only focuses on the vertical relationship between God and us but also includes the horizontal relationship between human beings. God created us as social beings. God as Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - is a social being, and we are created in his image. Two spiritual needs, the need for belonging and the need for forgiveness, fit into this aspect of the concept of shalom.

SPIRITUAL NEED FOR BELONGING

I returned home two weeks before she died to help care for her. An exhausted family had borne the burden of watching her slowly deteriorate physically and mentally over eighteen months and had lovingly cared for her. I met her home health nurse,

Debbie, a dear Christian, who had provided holistic care for her and the family. As we talked about the inevitable end and converting to hospice care, Debbie said, "I have never cared for a family where there is so much love for one another."

Most people learn early in life that to be loved and accepted, they must behave a certain way. This is conditional love, love with strings attached: "I love you because you satisfy my needs. I love you because of what you do or what you have."

A kind of love God wants us to enjoy is unconditional, unwarranted love - love that is given in spite of faults, undesirable traits or poverty. Parents who love their children in spite of their appearance or abilities exhibit this kind of love. Most of us have heard the expression, "Only a mother could love that child." That is unconditional love.

Children who do not experience unconditional love from their parents, even if they are provided with the necessary physical needs - food, clothing, shelter - often fail to grow or develop normally. We say the child fails to thrive. Adults deprived unconditional love are prone to depression, insecurity, feelings of isolation and fear.

God uses parental love to teach us about his perfect, unconditional love. While some parents are great at showing unconditional love, no one is perfect. Sometimes they fail because they have a personal need that prohibits them from loving their child at that moment. Sometimes children are demanding or behave in ways that make them unlovable. But God never fails to love us perfectly and unconditionally.

Because God's perfect, unconditional love is not our normal life experience, it can be difficult to comprehend. This is especially true for those who experienced abuse in their childhood. For survivors of abuse, to refer to God as "father" may conjure up fear, isolation, insecurity and depression associated

with mistreatment, rather than feelings of warmth, security, peace and belonging.

Because conditional love is the norm, we tend to impose that onto the way we think about God's love for us. We think if we do something, perhaps do some charity work or attend church, that we can earn God's love. We may think that because we have a special ability that might benefit God, such as a musical talent or a quick mind, he will love us more. That is not the case. We can do absolutely nothing to get God to love us more. His love is perfect, unconditional and complete.

Fear is a symptom of the spiritual need for love and belonging. We fear what others may think of us or whether we will fit into a group. When God's love is appropriated into our lives, then we can be free to be the people God created us to be. We need not try to earn God's favor. We need not fear anything because God's perfect love casts our fear. We can be secure in his love, and as a result, we can extend unconditional love to others.

SPIRITUAL NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

To my mother's question of "Why?" my sister replied, "Why not?" She understood that she was merely a sinner saved by God's grace. She had been forgiven of her guilt, and she had forgiven the wrongs done against her. She was at peace. She experienced Shalom.

Knowing right from wrong is part of our moral development. It begins in childhood as we learn that behavior has consequences. As we grow older, our understanding of right and wrong get shaped by our peers, expectations of society, and ethical principles.

Guilt is the feeling associated with being wrong. God uses guilt in a good way, to help us recognize when our behavior is wrong and to provoke us to

seek reconciliation with him. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God they experienced true guilt. They made excuses for what they did, tried passing the blame to someone else and to initially denied that they had rebelled. Their innocence was lost, and their beautiful relationship with God was destroyed. As a consequence of their sin, we are all born as sinful beings.

As we forgive, we rid ourselves of resentment, anger, bitterness and hatred. It is a powerful healing tool that restores shalom.

The good news is that God has provided a way for us to become a restored and holy people. By sending Jesus to take the punishment for our disobedience, God offers us forgiveness and restored relationship with him.

Not all guilt is godly. Sometimes we feel guilty because we feel we have failed to live up to an expectation or standard that God never imposed on us. We feel guilty when we are tempted, confusing temptation with sin. Christ was tempted, but never sinned. Others accuse us of being "wrong" because we violated a rule they created that was never God's intention. For example, when the disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, the religious leaders were outraged. They sought to impose guilt on the disciples by pointing out that they had not behaved in accordance with their rules. Society tends to redefine morality, often to suit its own purposes. Jesus restored the God-intended principle of the Sabbath when he told the leaders that the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27). False standards and imposed guilt denies that we are reconciled to God, when we really are.

More common is the moral relativism of our culture that blunts God's standard for right and wrong. "Do whatever seems good for you as long as it doesn't harm anyone else." Moral relativism denies that there is absolute truth. Culture defines its own standards of justice to fit its own desires. Society may imply that a behavior such as premarital sex is morally acceptable, although God calls it sin. Society tells us that we shouldn't feel guilty, but God has said that we are guilty of wrong. Moral relativism denies our need for forgiveness, and leaves us unreconciled to God.

Sometimes we are able to receive God's forgiveness, but we struggle with forgiving ourselves. For whatever reasons, we hang on to guilty feelings, preferring to think of ourselves as unworthy and sinful people. In doing so, we deny that God has forgiven us and imply that Jesus' sacrifice was inadequate. In a sense, we are insulting God by denying his love for us and the gift of his son that makes it possible for us to have a relationship with him.

Receiving God's forgiveness does not mean that we will not fail again. However, as often as we sin, God is always there to offer forgiveness (1 John 1:9). God also tells us that because he has forgiven us, we must then forgive others (Matthew 6:14-15). Unforgiveness is more harmful to the person who holds the grudge. As we forgive, we are able to rid ourselves of the resentment, anger, bitterness and hatred associated with being wronged. It is a powerful healing tool that restores *shalom*.

RECONCILIATION WITH CREATION/ENVIRONMENT

An often overlooked part of *shalom* is being reconciled with creation and the environment. As nurses, we are aware of the role that the environment plays in the healing process. Caring for fluid and electrolyte balance; monitoring pO2 levels; insuring that offensive odors are eliminated; and reducing noise levels – are not these components of good nursing care?

As a former missionary nurse, however, I have to admit that the waste in the current health care delivery system overwhelms me. As a person currently working in public health, the pollution of our air, water and soil leaves me questioning how well we are reconciled to our creation. This is an issue that needs more attention, one that the Christian community must rise to address.

It had been three years since she died. I found her sister-in-law and family visiting the grave when I went there that day. One of her little nieces asked, "What is Auntie Terry's body like" Is she wearing that pretty purple dress?" It was an opportunity to explain that the earthly bodies we now have return to the earth when we die. God has given us the responsibility to care for our bodies and this earth now. Some day when Jesus comes back, we will be given new bodies. We look forward to a new heaven and new earth, and we will live eternally reconciled in perfect shalom.

Grace Tazelaar, RN, MS has served Christ and the people He loves through nursing in Uganda, East Africa, and as domestic ministry coordinator with the Luke Society in Vicksburg, Mississippi. She works with small groups at her church in Elmhurst, Illinois, and is the missions director for Nurses Christian Fellowship. She has served on numerous boards, and is currently on the Board of Directors for CCHF.



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