

Finding 'Salvation' in 'Shalom'

Christian churches have convinced many believers that "salvation" only exists in the afterlife. But a truer understanding of the word and its synonym "shalom" reveals them to be messages calling for the present world to become a place of human fulfillment, writes Rev. Howard Bess.

By the Rev. Howard Bess

The Hebrew word "shalom" is commonly translated into English with the word "peace," but great damage is done in the translation. Shalom is so much broader, richer and all-encompassing than peace.

A dear friend of mine is an Old Testament scholar who has mastered many of the ancient Near Eastern languages. He explained that "shalom" exists when everything is the way it ought to be, though he still apologized for the inadequacy of that definition. He added, "Shalom is so much more." Shalom is when things are whole, complete, even perfect.

In everyday language, "shalom" is used by many as both a greeting and a farewell. When used as a greeting the message is one of hope and expectation: "I trust that everything is going well for you." When used as a farewell, the message is a prayer: "I pray that everything in your life is good and even the best."

The Bible contributes the message that in life there is such a thing as the way things ought to be. I suspect that every writer of Bible material held that basic conviction. The Bible's arguments and discussions are about how to achieve the experience of shalom.

The New Testament has a companion message that is also summed up in a single word, "salvation." Shalom and salvation can and should be understood as synonyms, yet the scandal of the Christian churches is the corruption of the meaning of the word salvation. Rather than a word that begs for a broad participation in life, salvation has come to mean a promise of a place in an ill-defined heaven after death. Shalom, on the other hand, is the offering of the whole and complete life during our tenure on earth.

The root meaning of salvation is wholeness, completeness. Thus, shalom and salvation should be conceptual companions.

The Bible can be viewed in different ways; each is word dependent. It can be seen as a religious library or as a holy book given by God to human beings with all the right words and without error. It can be seen as miscellaneous writings

collected by a particular strain of human beings, or it can be read as a series of great arguments among very bright and contentious people.

Given that the Bible is a book of differing opinions, many have assumed the contrasting perspectives are between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In fact, differing opinions are found within the Old Testament and within the New Testament. The two collections are much more alike than different; their unity is found in the basic idea that there is such a thing as “the way things ought to be.”

Furthermore, achieving that ideal is a pursuit in this life. None of us need to wait for a next life to know the truly satisfying life. In understanding that message, words do make a difference and good word usage can clarify rather than confuse.

Two other Bible words are worthy of note. They are both found in abundance in both Old and New Testament. The first word is love; the second is justice. Both are tools, neither is a goal, since the goal of the Bible tradition is shalom or salvation.

However, neither shalom nor salvation tells us how to get there. Justice and love provide the guidance toward how to achieve the good life. Jesus verbalized the love part of the formula: Love God. Love neighbor. Love one another. Love your enemy. But we need to be reminded that the love path is deeply rooted in the Old Testament, too.

The parables of Jesus are almost all about justice. In the calling for justice, he stood in the very best tradition of the Old Testament prophets. The justice message is plain. Justice calls for the needs of everyone to be met.

The Bible material has a lot of warts, carrying the evidence of many intense arguments. But the material has a basic message for all. The message is summed up in those four words: love, justice, salvation, and most of all shalom.

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