Peace

A Word Study

By Charles A. Ray, Jr.

IN SECULAR Greek culture peace was first of all the political and social status of a country that was not at war.[1] People also used the word "peace" to describe a more positive condition as well: "the state of law and order which gives rise to the blessings of prosperity."[2] *Eirene* is one of several Greek words that describe both the absence of conflict and the presence of prosperity. One can easily see why a wise king would conclude that the tranquility, economic prosperity, and social stability of

peace were better than the turmoil of war.[3] Shortly before the birth of Jesus, Emperor Augustus erected the *Ara Pacis* (Altar of Peace) in Rome to commemorate the era of peace that the Roman Empire was experiencing because of his reign.[4]

The Old Testament

The Hebrew word for *peace* (*shalom*) is usually defined as a condition of completeness, soundness, welfare, or peace.[5] *Shalom* often described the opposite of physical conflict or war. For

Left: Later version of a statue of Eirene, which is Greek for "Peace." In the original Greek version, Eirene held a figure of the infant named Ploutos (meaning "Wealth") perched in her left arm and looking up into her face. In this statue, Ploutos is lost, but the position of the surviving piece of Eirene's left arm indicates that she once held the child.

Elah Valley where Israel's army faced the Philistines and where David subsequently killed Goliath.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/9011)

Vista from atop Gibeon, which is located about 6 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Joshua established a covenant of peace with the men of Gibeon.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (18/30/2)

example, Joshua established a covenant of peace with the men of Gibeon, which effectively prevented Joshua from waging war against the city, even when Joshua discovered the men had deceived him (Josh. 9:15). When the Israelites recovered cities the Philistines had captured, peace was also established between Israel and the Amorites (1 Sam. 7:14).

Shalom also described a general condition of safety or well-being. After Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel, Jacob requested that God allow him to return to his home in peace (Gen. 28:21). Many English Bible versions translate the Hebrew *shalom* with the English adverb "safely."[6] David's father sent him to check on the welfare (*shalom*) of

his brothers, who were off at war (1 Sam. 17:18). When King David called Uriah back to Jerusalem to report on the battle, David asked him about the *shalom* of Joab, the *shalom* of the soldiers, and the *shalom* of the battle (2 Sam. 11:7, "how Joab and the troops were doing and how the war was going," HCSB). Used as a greeting, to ask about someone's *shalom* would be similar to the English greeting "How are you?" Departing guests were often sent away with the phrase "Go in peace" as a way of wishing for a safe and successful trip.

Above all, however, the Old Testament portrays peace as a gift from God. Aaron ended his blessing of the Israelites with a request that God grant peace to His people

(Num. 6:24-26). Gideon named his altar to God "Yahweh Shalom" (Judg. 6:24, HCSB). Unlike the false prophets who claimed peace where there was no peace (Ezek. 13:10), Isaiah was told of a child who would be Prince of Peace, whose peace would never end (Isa. 9:6-7).

The New Testament
The Old Testament's use of *shalom* strongly influenced the New Testament's use of the Greek word for peace (*eirene*). The New Testament uses the word both as a greeting and a blessing. On the morning after the earthquake, the Philippian jailer told Paul that he was free to "go in peace" (Acts 16:36, HCSB; see also Luke 7:50; 8:48). All of

**Left: Fragment of a lintel from the synagogue of Kfar Bar'am, which was located northwest of the Sea of Galilee. The inscription on the lintel reads: "May there be peace in this place and in all the places of Israel. Jose the Levite, the son of Levi, made this lintel. May blessing come upon his deeds."**

Paul's letters, as well as the two by Simon Peter, combine peace with grace as part of their greetings.[7]

Just as people attributed the peace and prosperity throughout the empire to Augustus, on a local level the Jewish leaders, as they presented their case against Paul, attributed those qualities to governor Felix (Acts 24:2). As was true in the Old Testament, however, so in the New Testament—true peace is a gift from God. During His last conversations with the Twelve before the cross, Jesus promised His disciples a peace that was wholly unlike anything they could find in the world (John 14:27). The presence of that peace meant fear was no longer necessary, even in the face of affliction, because Jesus had overcome the evil, worldly forces (16:33).

Paul would later unpack for his readers exactly what that peace entailed. God's totally incomprehensible peace is able to protect the heart and mind of the believer in Christ because the God of peace walks with the believers as they live for Him (Phil. 4:7,9). That peace is connected with God's act of justification (Rom. 5:1), with life (8:6), righteousness, and joy (14:17; see also Gal. 5:22)—and results in overflowing hope through the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:13).

The peace that is God's gift through Christ has affected our relationship with the rest of His body. The peace that has reconciled us to God has created one new humanity through Christ by tearing down the wall of hostility
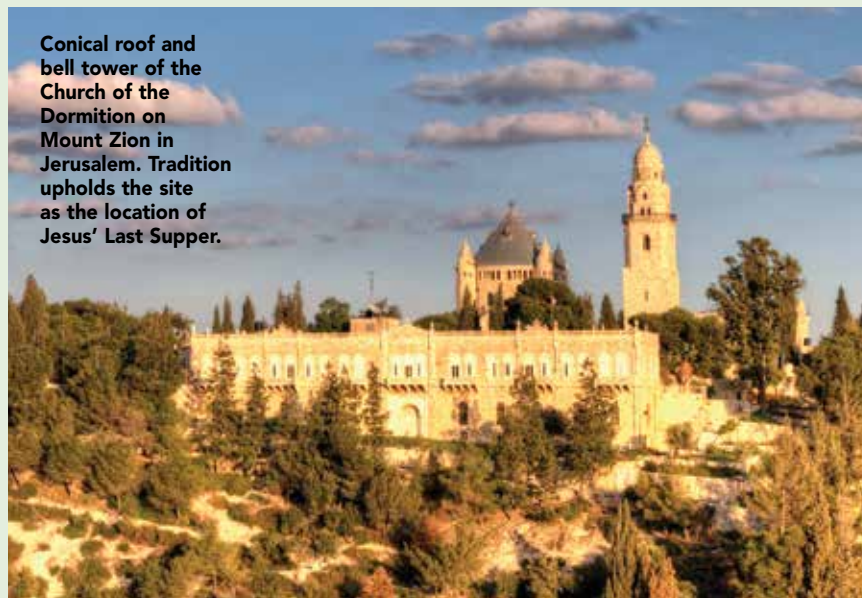
Conical roof and bell tower of the Church of the Dormition on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. Tradition upholds the site as the location of Jesus' Last Supper.

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that separated us (Eph. 2:14). It is that binding peace that allows believers to maintain the unity of the Spirit (4:3) by controlling our hearts (Col. 3:15). So, Christians must pursue the things related to peace and those things that build up the body of Christ (Rom. 14:19).

Sometimes knowing how much of the unique meaning of peace to read into a particular occurrence of the word can be challenging. For example, Jesus frequently greeted His disciples with the phrase "Peace be with you" (Luke 24:36; John 20:19,21,26). At one level it is the same greeting that any Jew might have given to another. However, Jesus' earlier promise of peace in the midst of conflict still echoes through the pages of John's Gospel. I am reminded of the priest who told the Danites to go in peace (Judg. 18:6), only to add, "The LORD is watching over the journey you

are going on" (HCSB). They could go in peace *because* God was going with them. Jesus' disciples could be in peace *because* He had given them peace that the world could not give (John 14:27; 20:19,21;). ◉

1. "εἰρήνη"(*eirene*, peace) in Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 424.

2. Hartmut Beck and Colin Brown, "εἰρήνη" (*eirene*, peace) in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 2:776.

3. "εἰρήνη"(*eirene*, peace) in Spicq, *Theological Lexicon*, 425.

4. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 262.

5. "שָׁלוֹם" (*shalom*, peace) in Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "*Shalom*" in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 1022.

6. See for example the HCSB, NIV.

7. In 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul added the word "mercy."

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