

## Prepare the Way of the Lord

When we turn to the New Testament, we find these same themes. John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ's public ministry, exhorted his hearers to change their lives. When the crowd asked him what to do, John replied in clear and certain terms: *Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise* (Luke 3:11).

## The Work of Justice and Peace: Jesus' Ministry

Jesus characterized his own earthly ministry by service to the poor, the outcasts, and the downtrodden. Early in his public ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue and read from the prophet Isaiah to describe his ministry: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* (Luke 4:18-19).

Luke presented us with Jesus at the beginning of his public ministry. Jesus identified himself with the Servant of the Lord and saw himself as part of the great prophetic tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos.

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign. But not only did he announce its coming in the power of the Holy Spirit, he also embodied God's reign. In his life, in what he said, and in his deeds, we see what God's reign is all about. In his death and resurrection, God's reign is inaugurated in a new and definitive way.

With Jesus, we have the fullness of *shalom*, of justice and peace. Jesus is our path to justice and peace. In him, we know and have the justice and peace of God. In Jesus, Yahweh's covenant has been renewed, and we are called to be agents of God's *shalom* in the world.

Paul reminds us that Jesus, *though he was rich, ... for your sakes ... became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich* (2 Corinthians 8:9).

## Christ Among Us

Jesus is the Poor One among us. He identified himself with poor and hungry people and those who suffer and are in need of help. Christians thus come face to face with a great mystery. God in Christ is present in a special way in poor and hungry people (Matthew 25:31-46). Christ represents himself to us in a special way in the hungry, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. He is among us in the outcasts and the oppressed of our age. Their cry for justice is Christ's cry for justice. The very Christ who suffered and died on the cross that all might be reconciled to God is crucified again and again in the suffering and death of poor and hungry people.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the new Christian community was care for those in need. Following the example of their Lord, the early church found ways to care for poor and hungry people, the needy in their midst.

The Bible does not offer us a ten-point program or a five-year plan of action on how to combat injustice in our world. Rather, the scriptures give us a vision of a new creation. *They will hunger no more, and thirst no more ... and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes* (Revelations 7:16a-17b).

**NOTE:** All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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# Biblical Basics on Justice



WOODCUTS BY HELEN SIEGL

*In every age Christians ponder  
their mission in the world.  
Is a passionate concern for justice  
part of being a follower of Jesus?  
Or is seeking justice something  
Christians may choose  
to do or not do?*

**W**HEN WE EXAMINE the scriptures, we find out how central justice is to the life of the Christian. There is no concept in the Old Testament with so central a significance for all relationships of human life as that of justice. The people of the Old Testament were

in relationship with God because of the covenant that existed between God and Israel.

As a member of this covenant community, each person was in relationship with every other person, including poor and needy people, one's family, and even strangers and aliens. Out of these relationships arose responsibilities and demands. The just person was faithful to these responsibilities and demands.

### God's Ownership, Our Stewardship

God created the world and all that is in it. Therefore God is the owner of everything in creation. *The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it* (Psalm 24:1). God invites human beings to be stewards of creation. We are invited to be good stewards of what belongs to God. Stewardship is not a way of managing *our* possessions. It means rather that we care for what *God* has entrusted to *us*.

### Let My People Go! The Cry of Yahweh

The justice of God is vividly portrayed in God's concern for the Israelite people when they were in Egypt. In the hold of bondage and slavery, they cried out to God, Yahweh, for help (Exodus 2:23-25). Yahweh called Moses to deliver the Israelite people from slavery:

*Then the Lord said: I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians* (Exodus 3:7-8).

The Exodus is the fundamental experience for the Jewish people. Every year the community of Israel gathers to celebrate and relive the Exodus. They are to remember that their God frees them from oppression and injustice. If they are to be faithful to God, they must free the oppressed and do justice toward others.

### Yahweh: Defender of the Oppressed

In the legal tradition of the Old Testament, we find the theme of concern for the oppressed

and poor of society: *The resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake* (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

Concern for the oppressed and the poor was at the core of the Israelites' calling. This concern was rooted not only in the covenant, but more importantly, in the very nature of Yahweh. Yahweh is the defender of the oppressed, the One who liberates the captives, the One who feeds hungry people:

*(The Lord) executes justice for the oppressed; ... gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind* (Psalm 146:7-8).

### Share Your Bread with the Hungry: The Message of the Prophets

Throughout Israel's history, the prophets reminded Israel to remain faithful to the covenant. Their primary mission was to lead the people back to the path of righteousness and justice. The prophets were sent not only to speak Yahweh's word, but also to speak on behalf of those who had no voice.

Yahweh complained through the prophets that the people had forgotten who it was that gave them their land and provisions. They, who once were hungry and oppressed, refused to feed the hungry and themselves became the oppressors. The people of Israel spoke folly and left the craving of the hungry unsatisfied (Isaiah 32:6, paraphrased).

Amos was one of the strongest in calling the people back to the way of justice. Israel was at the height of her economic and political power when Yahweh sent the poor shepherd Amos to call the people of Israel to repentance.

These people had often transgressed against the

covenant. One transgression was that they *oppressed the poor and robbed them of their grain* (Amos 5:11a, TEV). The injustice that the rich engaged in completely negated the value of their worship:

*I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream* (Amos 5:21-24). Where there is not justice, life is barren and worship of God is a sham.

### Shalom: The Vision of Peace

But where will justice lead us? What is the goal toward which the prophets call the people of Yahweh? In doing justice, we come to know God better: *Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord* (Jeremiah 22:15b-16).

In addition to knowing God better, doing justice leads to *shalom*, peace: *Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever* (Isaiah 32:16-17).

Where there is justice there is the possibility of peace. The opposite is also true: where there is oppression and injustice there can be no *shalom*.

What is this *shalom* God is calling us to experience? It is certainly more than the absence of war and violence. The basic meaning of *shalom* is wholeness. It involves all the conditions of life that make for wholeness and harmony. *Shalom* is the goal of God's work as deliverer and liberator. God's purpose in the world is to restore *shalom* wherever it has been broken. God's will for all is *shalom*, and the task of the community of faith is to do God's will.

