

For decades, the civil service has had welfare officers, whose role has centred around questions of staff well-being. In

more recent years, the well-being of citizens in general has come to the fore in government circles. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) now publishes figures on personal well-being. ONS reports that 'at national level, how people view their health is the most important factor related to personal well-being, followed by employment status and relationship status.'

Interestingly, the ONS statistics show that people in Northern Ireland report better ratings across all personal well-being measures (e.g. life satisfaction) than people in the other countries of the UK.

When we come to the Bible, we discover that well-being is by no means a new topic; rather, it is something that God refers to quite frequently in His word. It is what the well-known Hebrew word, *shalom*, is about. In this editorial I want to consider the concept in Scripture.

It has many facets

If you consult a concordance or Bible dictionary, you will find that a range of English words are needed to explain *Shalom*: completeness, health¹, prosperity, welfare², and peace³. (Of these, you'll find that by far the most frequent translation is 'peace'.) Clearly, these terms can have a spiritual as well as a physical sense, and relate to multiple aspects of life. To take just the word 'peace', this can apply to within our own self, to our relationship with God, and to how we interact with our fellow human beings. Evidently it's a big subject, and this article certainly won't deal with it comprehensively.

It comes from God

The blessing of Numbers 6:24-26 contains the words, 'the LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace'. Consider this beautiful description: the God of Peace⁴ (found in Romans 15:33, 16:20 and various other places in the New Testament – a good study in itself).

1. E.g. in Genesis 29:6, Jacob asks about Laban, 'Is he well?'

2. E.g. in Genesis 43:27, Joseph 'asked them [his brethren] of their welfare'.

3. E.g. in Genesis 15:15 (the first mention of *shalom*), the Lord tells Abram 'thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace'.

4. Compare Jehovah-shalom (Judges 6:24).

Reflect on these descriptions of the Son of God: the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6); the Lord of peace (2 Thessalonians 3:16). He said to His disciples in the upper room, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid' (John 14:27).

It is proclaimed by God's messengers

In our natural state, we are sinners, guilty before a holy God. We therefore do not experience God's peace, nor should we expect to. Indeed, we are due the exact opposite: 'he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him' (John 3:36). But God has good news to proclaim – the possibility, despite our having sinned against God, of peace with Him. Peter speaks of 'preaching peace by Jesus Christ' (Acts 10:36), and Paul, quoting the prophet Isaiah, writes of 'them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!' (Romans 10:15). Isaiah, writing prophetically of the death of Christ, says: 'the punishment that brought us peace was upon him... the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isaiah 53:5-6, NIV). Paul proclaims, 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God by our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 5:1).

It is to be enjoyed

In Romans 5, Paul goes on to write that 'we...rejoice in hope of the glory of God' (verse 2), and that 'we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement [reconciliation]' (verse 11). This is a peace that cannot change. However, as we know all too well, our feelings and our circumstance do change, in a way that seems for the worse. Anxiety can grip us. That is why Paul writes in another epistle, 'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:6-7, NIV).

It should characterise God's people

Scripture teaches that the Spirit of God dwells in each person who has saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:9). The life and character of God are therefore present in all true Christians, and inevitably will be evident in some degree. In Galatians 5:22-23 we read, 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance'. This divine love seeks the welfare of others (Romans 15:2), and to do good to all (Galatians 6:10). The psalmist David exhorts, 'Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it' (Psalm 34:14). James writes, 'But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then

peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace' (James 3:17-18).

Shalom!