

Sharing the Shalom of God's Kingdom

Total Time: 55-85 min

INTRODUCTION | 10 min

If there are new people, be sure everyone gets introduced. Even if everyone was here last time, make sure everyone knows each other's names.

Welcome to part four of our five-part discussion of the intersection of faith and politics!

In our first session we looked at Starting Points—our personal starting points and the starting point of the Bible, God creating humans in His own image and giving us a role to play, stewarding this amazing and interdependent world that He had created. We considered what it would mean to treat others as image-bearers, and discussed the challenge of pressing in and continuing to do that, especially with people who differ from us politically.

Our second session was about Choosing Jesus as King. The opening story was about Andrew Berg choosing to follow Jesus as his King instead of sitting on the throne of his life himself. The Scripture was about God's people demanding a human king. We discussed ways that we all tend to look for political leaders who will function as our saviors, deliverers, and protectors as we navigate this fallen world.

Last time we talked about turning from temptation to the Kingdom of God. We read about the example of Jonathan Walton's mother and how she had set her sights on Jesus and wasn't enamored with all the trappings of success. We looked at the story of Jesus resisting the temptation to disobey God in order to gain the power and acclaim that is His due, and how He chose the way of the cross instead of the way of power.

Opening Question: Did any of you make changes to your media input this past week? (See *last session's challenge*.) How did that go? Did you notice any impact on your internal life?

Pray to Begin: Let's begin by centering ourselves with The Lord's Prayer¹.

¹ English translations of *The Lord's Prayer*, © 1998, English Language Liturgical Consultation (ELLC), and used by permission. www.englishtexts.org

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

STORY | 10 min

Seeking the Shalom of the City

Let's begin with a story from InterVarsity Multiethnic Resource Specialist Connie Anderson.

Please have someone read this story aloud.

In my family growing up, conversations about politics were steeped in cynicism. "Politician" was a dirty word. My parents voted, but otherwise were disengaged.

When my husband and I moved our family into a small, very secular, inner-ring suburb, I prayed for opportunities to share the love of Jesus. In my mind, there was a clear distinction between "spiritual" activities like leading Bible studies and "secular" activities like getting involved in community organizations, and I was focused on the spiritual. But when a neighbor asked if I would help with a simple door-to-door survey about a bike race in our community, I agreed. It seemed like a good way to meet some neighbors.

Several of us attended a City Council meeting to present the results of our survey. I fully expected the meeting to be utterly boring, but I was in for a shock!

Clearly, most of the Council members were true public servants. They listened respectfully and gave well-reasoned explanations for their votes on the bike race. One member, however, was irrationally argumentative about the most trivial things. He showed several other signs of dementia, too. His behavior made it very difficult for the City Council to move through their agenda. I was only visiting that night, but was totally frustrated; I couldn't imagine how the other Council members could be expected to work in that situation.

I wondered how in the world this man could ever have been elected! Then the realization hit me – *I had voted for this man, simply because his name was familiar! People like me were the reason we had such a dysfunctional City Council!*

In that moment, I determined never to vote in ignorance again. I realized that I was overly informed on national races – I knew the names of the candidates’ dogs! – but I knew very little about local politics. In various casual conversations I shared my City Council experience and my subsequent realization with various friends and neighbors. These were very well-educated people, yet almost all of them also admitted that when it came to local politics, they had been voting in ignorance. I was embarrassed by my own irresponsibility and horrified to realize that I was not the exception.

My concern for the well-being of my community led me to get to know the City Council and School Board members and candidates personally. When elections neared, I sent emails to my local friends, sharing who I was voting for and why. I was careful to speak about each candidate factually and respectfully, even if I didn’t recommend voting for them. Soon I discovered that my emails were being widely shared and had gone “small-town viral.” Community members regularly thanked me for taking the time to learn about local politics because they did not have the bandwidth to do it themselves.

In each subsequent election cycle, I shared my personal recommendations for City Council and School Board races, and the people I recommended, whether they were Republicans or Democrats, won the seats. Fortunately, these public servants were able to work well together to bring greater flourishing to our little community. I definitely had to laugh when local leaders started referring to me as the community’s “kingmaker” because this was so unexpected, and so far from the cynicism and disengagement of my parents’ kitchen table.

According to my earlier categories, my political involvement was “secular,” yet I knew that a big part of loving my neighbors involved taking the time to serve my community in this way. Interestingly, because I had earned so much trust by doing this, numerous people began to turn to me as an unofficial community chaplain, too. I had many opportunities to pray with people who would never have opened up to a pastor or priest, and I even had the honor of leading an elected official to faith on our screened porch! When we moved away, one very secular acquaintance posted on my Facebook wall: “I hate to see you go. Every time I walk my dog past your house it gives me a sense of peace to know that you are there. Thank you for all the ways you have served our community through the years.”

God had invited me to seek the shalom of the city, and I’m so glad I said yes!

RESPONSE

Let's take a moment to reflect on how we are responding emotionally to this story.

1. What emotions came up for you as you heard this story?

Potential Examples:

- *"I felt skeptical because I can't imagine a community that wouldn't be entrenched in warring political parties. I feel cheated and angry that our generation has never experienced this."*
 - *"I felt challenged by the idea that what I would have considered secular activities could be part of following God. That feels hopeful and affirming."*
 - *"I felt inspired to learn more about local politics as a way of loving the literal neighbors in my community."*
2. In what ways have you sensed God's invitation to love your neighbors? How do you want to serve those around you individually and what policies that you can advocate for that would lead to their flourishing? **Write down your answer in the first box on your handout.**

SCRIPTURE STUDY | 30 min

Reflecting God's Shalom in Our Communities

INTRODUCTION

This Scripture passage is from the Old Testament again, meaning that it was long before Jesus was born. Taking place around 590 BCE, the book of Jeremiah is actually a letter from the Prophet Jeremiah to Jewish exiles in Babylon, the pagan empire that had defeated Israel and taken many captives. Jeremiah wrote this letter to combat the false prophets who were wrongly assuring people that their exile was ending soon, implying that the Israelites should live with a short-term view, not bothering to build or plant or care about their current context. In contrast, Jeremiah accurately prophesied that they would still be living in Babylon another 70 years.

Jeremiah 29:11 is an oft-quoted (and often misused) verse in Christian circles. It frequently shows up on graduation cards, implying that God's plan is for the new graduate to experience nothing but happiness and success in life. In context, however, it is written to a distraught and grieving people living as a persecuted minority in a

strange land, and it's God's instructions for them as exiles who will not be released nearly as soon as the false prophets had been telling them they would.

Even though we are not in the Israelites' situation, in a broader sense, those of us who are followers of Jesus live as spiritual exiles. Our true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, but we live in a world that operates very differently. We, too, have a choice to make: do we just focus on getting to our real home, heaven, or should we spend time and energy caring for the people and environment around us? Is this an either/or proposition?

PASSAGE: JEREMIAH 29:4-14 (NRSVue)

⁴ Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶ Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸ For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to your dreams that you dream, ⁹ for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord. ¹⁰ For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹² Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³ When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴ I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the characters and what is happening?
2. What instructions does God give to the Israelites? What promises does he give them?
3. What tensions or challenges between characters do you see in the text?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think God told the Israelites to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and have children in Babylon? How would you imagine they felt about these instructions? What might this reveal about His character?
2. In verse 7, the word “welfare” is the Hebrew word “shalom,” which often means peace between all relationships and points towards collective prosperity and wholeness. What does this say about how God views the Babylonians?
3. What resistance might the Israelites feel toward God’s call in this passage? Do you see anything in this passage that might make it easier for them to obey God in this?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. In the United States, many people feel like politics is a strange and maybe even hostile land. Perhaps some feel exiled like political wanderers. What would it look like to metaphorically “build houses, plant gardens, and have children” in this current situation?
2. When we are under oppression, it feels extremely difficult to seek the welfare of our oppressors. Yet God commands it here, and even says that the fate of the Israelites is linked to the fate of Babylon. What would it look like to love those who look like political oppressors, to pray for them, and to seek their shalom? Take a moment to write down a prayer and possibly share it with those in your group.
3. Christians are not in the Israelites’ political conditions in the United States. Yet, all followers of Jesus live as spiritual exiles. Since our true citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, until Jesus returns, we recognize that our world operates very differently. Jeremiah instructs the Israelites to put down roots and to seek the good of their Babylonian neighbors and communities. He also assures them that their situation of exile is not permanent, that they have a future hope. As followers of Jesus, it can be wearying to keep seeking justice and shalom in our very broken world. How can the assurance of Jesus’ return give us hope and endurance?

CONCLUSION

In this session, we started with Connie’s story, where she initially distinguished between “spiritual” and “secular” activities and was surprised when Jesus led her to serve her

community through getting involved in local politics. In our Scripture, we saw the people of God being instructed to put down roots and seek the well-being and flourishing of their surrounding communities – even though they were living as exiles in enemy land. Along with this instruction, though, they were given the promise that their exile would end and that God had a future and a hope for them. As we consider how we are called to engage with politics, we are called to seek shalom right here in our broken world – including God’s shalom for those who would harm us. And we can do this with confidence and joy because the Scriptures promise us that we have an assured future and hope; King Jesus has promised to return and make all things new!

CHALLENGE

Ask Jesus to show you your next step toward seeking the welfare of your neighbors and even oppressors (either those in your immediate community or across the globe) through political involvement or social action.

Potential Examples:

- *Participate in a protest/speak out about oppression that you have not personally experienced.*
- *Attend a meeting of your local school board, city council, or student government so that you can start to become better informed about issues, needs, and leaders in your community.*
- *With your Christian community, find practical ways to partner with others in seeking the flourishing of your campus.*
- *Ask a friend to hold you accountable to take that next step.*

CLOSING | 5 min

If you have time, please continue to the Beyond the Text section!

Make sure to thank participants for coming and invite them back, sharing the date, time and location for the next meeting.

Ex. “Thank you for coming today!”

If you look at the bottom of your handout, you’ll see a QR code. This code takes you to an electronic version of today’s study. And if you’d like to dig deeper, the electronic version also includes an excerpt from the book [Twelve Lies that Hold America Captive and the Truth that Sets Us Free](#) about Shalom versus the American Dream.

Please save this handout along with the ones you will get in each succeeding session. We'll refer back to them as a way of reviewing what we've learned.

Closing Prayer: Lord, thank you for your love towards us, your love for all people, and Your Will for us to be reconciled to you, one another, and all of creation. Give us the strength, courage and wisdom to love you with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

*Scan the QR code for more resources
on God's Good News About Politics*



BEYOND THE TEXT (OPTIONAL) | 30 min

Seeking God's Shalom Means Leaving the American Dream

Please read the following excerpt silently.¹

Read time: 5 mins

Jeremiah and the Israelites suffered brutal oppression under the Babylonians. Yet, God called them to seek the shalom of those who oppressed them along with their own. Mirroring this reality, the Israelites suffered under a violent, exploitative Roman occupation and Jesus commands Peter and the disciples to love and pray for their enemies and practice generosity towards them. In Luke 5:1-11, we see Peter's call to ministry. This is Peter's moment of profound obedience, courage, and faith. First, in response to Jesus' entering his fishing boat, Peter pushes out from shore and allows Jesus to teach the crowd. Second, Peter is willing to push farther from shore even after he had fished all night with no success. Peter was likely exhausted and discouraged. If there were no fish, he would have no food and no income. And now here was Jesus, a carpenter's son, telling Peter, a fisherman who knows his trade, to go into deeper water and drop his now clean nets in the middle of the day where no fish would be anyway. Peter knows this isn't the best time or place to fish, but he obeys. And because of his obedience, Peter witnesses a miracle. At a time and in a place where it made no human sense for him to catch fish, there are more fish than he can carry to shore, and he has to ask for help.

So what could be Christ's call to us in our context? In White American Folk Religion, under the banner of the American dream, Peter would try to hire Jesus and compliment him on his natural talents and abilities to catch fish. Or perhaps he would interview Jesus or try to get his three-step process for what to do when he can't catch fish. At a minimum, in the American dream, Peter would have taken the fish to market and cashed in on this great catch. But instead, Peter takes a step of courage. He leaves his business, training, income, and all that comes with that to be with Jesus and learn the ways of God. By faith, he puts down his nets and accepts the invitation to become a fisher of men and one of Jesus' disciples.

Upon graduating from Columbia, I told billionaire entrepreneur John Kluge that I would be coming on staff with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship to direct the New York City

¹ Walton, Jonathan P. *Twelve Lies That Hold America Captive: And the Truth That Sets Us Free*. Westmont: IVP, 2019, 99.

Urban Project. Bear in mind that between 2006 and 2008, John had purchased more than six hundred copies of my books of poetry to share with his family, friends, and colleagues. He and his wife sponsored my spoken word workshops and performances in schools, prisons, and churches. He shared honestly that he thought this job wasn't a good idea and offered to connect me with publishers to continue to grow my career and platform in writing.

I considered his advice and wrestled with what it would mean to raise financial support and live in complete dependence on God and other people for my provision. I struggled with saying no to becoming famous and the idea of exchanging performing in front of fans with sitting in front of fidgety college students. Ultimately though, no matter how I sloshed it around in my brain, the choice was between doing what I was good at and utilizing my gifts for my own comfort and benefit, or being who God called me to be and walking in obedience to Christ. I believe this invitation from God in 2008 set the stage for him to speak clearly to me in 2011 to commit twenty years to his work through me in InterVarsity. I said yes, but not because I believed it was the best idea and would maximize my personal growth and impact. I responded like Peter in Luke 5:5, "I will do as You say."

Now, if this was the American dream at work, at this point in the essay I would give three action steps to be faithful, obedient, and courageous in your own life. But the beginning, middle, and end of this story are about Jesus and what he is doing in the world. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a road map to "my best life now." It is Christ crucified, buried, and raised from the dead that we might have an eternal place in an eternal family. Peter's story continues not only with faithfulness and courage, but also with disobedience to and rejection of Jesus. We see these difficult moments in Luke 22:54-62. Here the Gospel writer recounts Peter's denials of his relationship with, allegiance to, and knowledge of Christ. Earlier in Luke 22, Jesus said he prayed that Peter's faith would be strengthened to withstand Satan's challenges. Peter asserted that he would follow Jesus to prison and even death. Peter's assertion is met with a predictive rebuke, "I say to you, Peter, the rooster will not crow today until you have denied three times that you know Me" (Luke 22:34).

The next day Jesus was in a vulnerable position, surrounded by enemies, betrayed by a friend, and certainly about to be put to death. And Peter, the rock on which the church is to be built, denies its Cornerstone, Jesus Christ himself—not just once but three times, just as Jesus had said he would.

Because the kingdom of God comes close to us in the person of Jesus, Christ exercises His power to confer an identity on us that is rooted in a place that is unshakeable. Our

actions don't determine our access to his table; his act of sacrificing himself confirms our entry. Jesus modeled for us how to seek shalom and pursue it. And so we follow His example, seeking the shalom of all people made in the image of God.

DISCUSS THE TEXT

1. Followers of Jesus are not primarily citizens of the world, but citizens of the Kingdom of God. So, how does God's vision of our lives in the United States conflict with the American Dream?
2. If you were to "leave your net" like Peter to "seek the shalom of Babylon" like the Israelites were called to, what might that look like? What resistance would you face?
3. Ask God for a vision of what a life fully given over to Him might look like and for the courage and community to live it out.