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## Chapter 1

# GARDENS, NOT WALLS

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon, Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is darkness, light. Where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, To be understood as to understand, To be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen. —ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us—  
so that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

—PSALM 67:1–2

What on earth is God's calling for His heaven-bound people? Are we Christians supposed to build walls or plant gardens? That is the million-dollar question for American believers who've absconded from Kansas to the land of giants. If David's clear sense of calling made him brave, and if David's courage in his land of giants derived from knowing with certainty what God had assigned him to do, then logic dictates that knowing with certainty God's assignment will make us courageous too. Christ's call to His church, therefore, is the same as God's historical call to His people throughout history. It is not to build defensive walls to keep people far from God *out*, but rather to plant beautiful gardens, places of shalom, to beckon people far from God *in*.

So again, what on earth is God's calling for His heaven-bound people? Great question! And to get the answer, we must first understand the context. God's calling comes not in a vacuum, but against the background of human history in our fallen world. The first step in embracing our courage-inducing calling from God is to understand the human predicament that He's called us to help fix.

### **The Vandalism of Shalom<sup>1</sup>**

At the Bible's beginning, we learn how our world became broken by the entrance of sin into Paradise. God Himself had planted the garden of Eden and not only made it a home for Adam and

Eve, but also a place where peace (*shalom*, used 250 times in the Old Testament) prevailed.

**Christ's call to His church, therefore, is the same as God's historical call to His people throughout history. It is not to build defensive walls to keep people far from God *out*, but rather to plant beautiful gardens, places of shalom, to beckon people far from God *in*.**

Shalom for our ancient human forebears meant not only the absence of meaningless wars and frivolous lawsuits, but also the presence of completeness, wholeness, health, tranquility, prosperity, fullness, rest, and harmony in their relationships with God, each other, themselves, and the whole creation.<sup>2</sup> Sounds like Adam and Eve had scored a trip to Fantasy Island (a TV series that debuted in 1977, for my younger readers who know only Jeff

Probst's *Survivor* today!), right? But no. It was way better (they didn't need the diminutive Tattoo to announce their arrival by

ringing a bell and yelling, “De plane, Boss, De Plane!” And besides, as cool as Ricardo Montalban was as Mr. Roarke, he wasn’t divine). Far from a merely expensive, exotic vacation, God Himself had created people from the beginning to live forever in this breathtakingly beautiful, shalom-dripping garden as their home.

Therein lies the epic tragedy of Eden’s destruction through the vandalism of shalom. We had it made in the shade (literally) but blew it all in a sinful power play with a huge generational price tag: Paradise Lost (with apologies to John Milton).

That first power play happened not in a hockey rink or on Wall Street or in a political smoke-filled room, but in a garden, in *the* garden . . . of Eden. You can read all about it in Genesis 3. The Enemy of God and humans, Satan, disguised as a snake, found a soft spot in Eve’s and Adam’s new human hearts. “God knows that when you eat the fruit, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Hmmm! Eve had just been invited to put the crown on and see how it felt to have *real* power and be empowered to get *whatever* she wanted at God’s and others’ expense. Adam also chimed in with the thought that he better look out for himself since he’s the Number One man. So they essentially told God to take a hike and they’d look after their own affairs from now on.

This bone-headed decision (which you and I would probably have made as well!) was an expression of human pride and will for power (“be like God”), which the Lord obviously could not abide. Just as there’s no way Fantasy Island could survive with people who had made its destruction their goal, Adam and Eve were ejected from Eden, estranged from God, and consigned to conflict within themselves, among themselves, and even with the created order. They (and all of us humans ever since) paid an egregious price for that forbidden bite, which the serpent failed to mention:

estrangement from their Father God and the jettisoning of their shalom . . . and ours too. “If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:18). “If only,” indeed! Augustine’s famous opening to his *Confessions* acknowledges our loss: “you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you.”<sup>3</sup> The entrance of sin into Eden through the rebellion of our human forebears resulted in profound brokenness for people and creation itself, shattering God’s perfect peace and creating ugly places. As Dr. Barry Jones explains, “When sin enters the story, shalom is vandalized. God’s glorious intention for his good creation is subverted. The wholeness and harmony we were created to enjoy with God, with each other, with creation and with ourselves is fundamentally violated.”<sup>4</sup>

And the beat goes on. Shalom violated in Eden becomes shalom vandalized in history. Human pride’s decision to compete with God by attempting to become like God explains why brothers and sisters feud and why marriages shatter and why neighbors fight and churches split and friendships end. It explains why alliances disintegrate and why treaties fail and why nations fight. War itself, you see, is a symptom of the fear-inducing vandalism of shalom in a million individual human hearts! As the Associated Press reported, “For four decades a gut-level ingredient of democracy—trust in the other fellow—has been quietly draining away. These days, only one-third of Americans say most people can be trusted. Half felt that way in 1972. . . . Forty years later, a record high of nearly two-thirds say ‘you can’t be too careful’ in dealing with people.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, Ray Pritchard reports that “Psychology Today posed this intriguing question, ‘If you could push a button and eliminate any person with no repercussions to yourself, would you do it?’ Sixty percent of those

responding answered yes. One man posed an even better question, ‘If such a device were invented, would anyone live to tell about it?’”<sup>6</sup> That simple question exquisitely frames the vandalism of shalom in our world.

### **The Shalom Restoration Project Begins**

If vandalized shalom is the problem, then restored shalom is the solution. But can that happen, and if it does, what does it look like? In his 2008 novel *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, Steven Galloway offers us intriguing answers in fictionalizing the historical account of Vedran Smailović an opera cellist who became famous during the siege of Sarajevo in the Bosnian War. Each day, citizens struggled to find food and water while living in constant fear of bombshells, mortars, and sniper bullets. Smailović lived near one of the few working bakeries, where a line of twenty-two people had gathered on May 26, 1992. On that terrible morning, a mortar shell fell in their midst, killing all. Vedran rushed to the scene and melted in grief at the carnage he encountered. The next day, he returned to that very spot wearing black tails and tie. He sat with his cello on a fire-scorched chair in the bomb crater and performed Albioni’s “Adagio in G Minor.” His evocative playing drew a large crowd in spite of the danger of an attack, and when he was finished, there was a moment of profound silence followed by thunderous applause. “Oh thank you, this is what we so desperately needed!” shouted hundreds through broken voices and flowing tears.

For the next twenty-two days, one for each victim of the bombing, Smailović mitigated the ugliness of war with his only weapon—the beauty of his music. Sniper fire still sprayed around him, and mortars still rained down in the neighborhood, but he never stopped playing. His music created an oasis amidst the

horror, an alternate vision of beauty that offered momentary respite to the people of Sarajevo as well as a challenge to those who were destroying the city. A “place-maker of peace,” he became known as the “Cellist of Sarajevo,” who offered the blessing of peace, if only locally and momentarily, to a shalom-vandalized city.

In so doing, Vedran merely participated in God’s thousands-of-years-old shalom-restoration project that was launched in the very beginning pages of the Bible. God’s plan called for the vandalism of shalom to be mitigated by blessing-bearing shalom place-makers.

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” (Gen. 12:1–3)

Walter C. Kaiser Jr., summarizes the ultimate import of these verses (more commonly known as the Abrahamic covenant). “The message and its content, in fact the whole purpose of God, was that He would make a nation, give them a ‘name,’ bless them so that they might be light to the nations and thereby be a blessing to all the nations. To shrink back would be evil on Israel’s part. Israel was to be God’s missionary to the world—and so are we [church] by the same verses. The mission has not changed in our own day.”<sup>77</sup> Vedran Smailović proves that last point. In becoming the “Cellist of Sarajevo,” he just fell in line with God’s ancient program for His people as played out on the pages of Scripture.

## **Pockets of Peace**

I am so glad that Abram obeyed God's invitation to leave his comfy pad in Ur of the Chaldees to restore shalom in a broken world by being God's blessing-bearer. He stepped out in faith, and God honored him by changing his name to "Father of Nations." History shows that his descendants, the Israelites, would carry on God's shalom-restoration project as place-makers of peace. For example, when God raised up Moses to set the people free from slavery in Egypt and lead them home in the Exodus, the first oasis Israel reached in the wilderness was "Bethelim" (Hebrew for "house of palms"). At "Elim," twelve springs fed seventy palm trees. This was a beautiful metaphor for the covenant mission of the twelve Hebrew tribes among the seventy nations of the world at that time. Elim was a little Eden, a place of shalom and refreshment in the wilderness, a foretaste of the Promised Land, and a place of peace in the wilderness. Already the descendants of Abraham were getting their groove back as the "Cellists of Sand City"!

Moving along to the seventh century BC, we find the prophet Jeremiah with the unenviable job of writing to some ten thousand Jewish captives who had been taken in the first exile to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar initially defeated King Jehoiachin in 605 BC. No wonder he bore the moniker "Weeping Prophet." His task was to encourage the captives to make the best of a very unhappy situation, because they were going to be stuck in it for seventy years! So how did he do it? By assuring them of God's future comfort? No. He reminded them of God's ancient calling in this letter sent from Jerusalem:

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build

houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (Jer. 29:4–7)

I daresay this was not the first message the Israelites in Babylon wanted to hear! Organize as rebels into little platoons of military resistance? Ah, that might have been more satisfying. Or at least wall yourselves off into righteous little silos where those big bad Babylonian bullies can't sully your tender conscience with their persistent badgering! That might have been more reassuring. But no. Through the prophet, God was calling His blessed people to bless their captors, even though they were literally foreigners and exiles. He instructed them to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city” by becoming active cultural agents, even in sin-broken Babylon. This meant carving out beautiful pockets and places and expressions of shalom in the midst of very painful pockets and places and expressions of ugliness in the capital city of their enemy.

Here is the irony. Many of the exiles God was calling to become place-makers of peace in Babylon had been perpetrators of injustice in Judah. Earlier the prophet Jeremiah had channeled God's heart on the matter: “This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place. For . . . if you do not obey these commands, declares the LORD, I swear by myself that this palace will become a ruin”

(Jer. 22:3–5). Sure enough, they didn't, and it did, and so we observe that the Lord feels strongly about injustice anytime, anywhere. "For I, the LORD, love justice; I *hate* robbery and wrongdoing" (Isa. 61:8).

It's safe to conclude that God hates the sin of injustice for the simple reason that it's just more vandalism of shalom. He hates the powerful and rich oppressing the powerless and poor through dishonor, robbery, and physical violence because it's just more breaking of peace. He hates injustice whether it shows up as cronyism, racism, classism, sexism, or fascism. He hates it whether it works its way out through back-scratching, power plays, unholy alliances, or unbridled lusts. Neal Plantinga cogently explains why: "God hates sin not just because it violates his law but because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be . . . we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically (e.g., by disease), morally, spiritually, or otherwise."<sup>8</sup>

In Babylon, God wanted His people to learn new ways by remembering an old way. No longer were they to vandalize shalom. Instead, they would create safe havens for shalom. No longer would God's people act out a nightmare of injustice. Instead, they would live out God's dream of a world set right and thereby restore desperately needed pockets and places of shalom in a chaotic world.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light

will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard. (Isa. 58:6–8)

In other words, God wants our first impulse in reversing injustice's vandalism of shalom to be garden-planting, not wall-building. Surely there will be times (as there have always been) when the people of God must stand their ground and build strong walls of truth and protection. But may our hearts' main inclination be to planting all the gardens we possibly can.

### **Jesus' Dream of a World Set Right**

This Old Testament dream of a world set right was the object of Jesus' own earthly mission.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16–21)

Jesus' amazing self-introduction through the reading of the Isaiah scroll blew the socks (or if you will, sandals) off His

Nazarene listeners in the synagogue that day. He directly claimed to be the heaven-sent King who had come to bring justice and restore shalom! It was the great apostle Paul who later explained that Christ inaugurated the church's role in God's great shalom-restoration project by dying on Calvary's cross in our stead. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Rom. 5:1–2). Shalom is essentially the Old Testament word for salvation. It means to be rightly related to God and others, so that God's gifts flow freely to you and through you. Clement of Alexandria put it this way in his translation of Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are those who have stilled the incredible battle which goes on in their own souls." That's exactly what happens when we are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Hearts are no longer troubled but blanketed by peace because the very harmony God had given Adam and Eve in the garden is restored.

Jesus, then, is the King who died to rescue God's people from the vandalism of shalom and to restore them to the beauty of shalom. No wonder Isaiah calls Him "Prince of Peace [*sar shalom*]" (9:6). Shalom was a big deal for Jesus. So it should not surprise us that a main goal of the prayer He taught us to pray was to lead the church to be not only the world's primary *beneficiaries* of shalom but also the world's primary *place-makers* of it: "This, then, is how you should pray: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'" (Matt. 6:9–10). If that prayer were answered, if the kingdom of God, whose Prince is "Sar Shalom," showed up in the day-to-day realities of our life and world, it would look like a community of people pursuing shalom by seeing, feeling, and responding with the heart of God to brokenness and injustice in the world.

**Jesus was always engaging people—even people who didn't necessarily want to be engaged, like the woman who sneaked up to touch His robe or the tax-collector who was hiding in the tree.**

We know this because that's precisely what the kingdom looked like during Jesus' earthly ministry, in which He powerfully modeled shalom place-making and seed-planting for us. Jesus was always taking careful note of people, recognizing not only their deep need but also their inner beauty: a widow on her way to the cemetery to bury her only son, a blind man by the side of the road, a man in the crowd with a withered hand, children who were eager to be blessed. He

was always engaging people—even people who didn't necessarily want to be engaged, like the woman who sneaked up to touch His robe or the tax-collector who was hiding in the tree. Jesus reached out to them and engaged them in conversation, not to embarrass them, but to let them know they mattered, to plant the seeds of shalom. He did this in such a way that they were spurred on to follow Him, to renounce their sins, to turn from their self-focused lives. As He planted seeds, He cultivated growth in people in unexpected ways.

Jesus "planted gardens" at a sorrowful Samaritan well, a despairing Jerusalem pool, a skeptical fisherman's boat, the struggling-to-believe side of a mountain, the glory-infused top of a mountain, a self-righteous Pharisee's house, a forgiven tax-collector's party, the imposing Temple Courts, a garden of agony (Gethsemane), a high priest's great room turned courtroom, a Roman arena of scourging, and the shore of a storm-tossed sea. People flocked to Jesus' places of peace and there found the incredible blessings of transformation, faith, and restoration to shalom.

## **Gardens, Not Walls**

When I realized that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, I had my answer to this chapter's opening question: What on earth is God's calling for His heaven-bound people? Are we supposed to build walls or plant gardens? I now knew that getting a spiritual green thumb was my calling!

This was a revelation to me. For many years of my ministry as a pastor, I'd thought wall-building was my assigned task. After all, God calls us Christians to holiness, right? So surely walls must be built to keep the evil out. God calls us Christians to righteousness, right? So surely walls must be built to keep the troops in (line). God calls us to justice, right? So surely walls must be built to threaten injustice, right? Surely. But really? I was never quite sure, and that uncertainty kept me restless through the "culture wars" of the last generation. One example of how all of that came together for me occurred all the way back in 1991. As the senior pastor of Irving Bible Church (IBC), I joined Operation Rescue and started getting myself thrown in the hoosegow for illegally (though passively) blocking the Routh Street (Dallas) Abortion Clinic's doors during their peak business hours on Saturday. I'd go down to that infamous abortuary on Saturdays with a group of my culture-warrior friends (once with the newly converted Norma McCorvey, the original "Jane Roe" of the infamous 1973 Supreme Court case) with my game-face on and my Bible verses proving the humanity of unborn children at the ready. I did not appreciate the "pain grips" that the Dallas police dutifully but unnecessarily applied to our necks to keep this passive, frumpy group of Ghandi-like protesters under control as they hauled us away to the paddy wagons. But I confess I did truly understand their aggravation at (I'm sure) an inordinate number of sore "Blue" backs

due to our impertinent insistence that the police carry us like so many sacks of uncooperative potatoes. (I confess that I enjoyed that part. A lot.) And I also must confess that, on the occasion of my first incarceration, I enjoyed the shocked look on then Dallas Seminary President Dr. Donald K. Campbell's face when I was unexpectedly able to introduce him as the preacher at IBC that Sunday because I was released earlier than expected from Dallas's Lew Sterrett Correctional Facility. He didn't know what I'd been up to until I said, "So glad I could get out of jail in time to introduce you, Dr. Campbell." His face turned three shades of red as he replied, "Um, thanks very much, I think." Hey, my newly created rap sheet was just an emblem of my contribution to the culture war, the latest volley in fulfilling my perceived purpose of fighting the good fight by building a big wall.

All that changed when it became clear to me that God wanted me to plant gardens, not build walls, and that getting a spiritual green thumb and not notches on my spiritual pistol-grip was my calling. God doesn't always call His people to be spiritual Seal Team Six fighters, but many times He calls us to be shalom-restoring ambassadors and place-makers of peace: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18–20).

Jesus is the Master Gardener. He desires that people far from God would find shalom in the gardens He has planted. He is calling people far from God into the garden. As Simon Holt expresses it, "Far from the task of rescuing people from the world, the

mission of the church is to embody the transformative presence of God in and for it.”<sup>9</sup> There it is again. Do you see it? “Blessed to be a blessing.” N. T. Wright says it a different way. “We are called to be part of God’s new creation, called to be agents of that new creation here and now. We are called to model and display that new creation in symphonies and family life, in restorative justice and poetry, in holiness and service to the poor, in politics and painting.”<sup>10</sup> Whoa now! Could the good Dr. Wright say again what our calling is, please? “Called to be agents of [the] new creation.” I believe another way of saying it is that we are called to be place-makers of peace, shalom restoration artists, or the “Cellists of the Cosmos” (with apologies to Vedran Smailović!) if you will.

### **Beautiful Purpose, Amazing Courage**

It’s a most beautiful calling, don’t you think? And fundamentally simple, too, as defined by Andy Crouch: “Likewise our mission is not primarily to ‘engage the culture’ but to ‘love our neighbor.’ Our neighbor is not an abstract collective noun, but a real person in a real place . . . we will be ready to be the people of God in our cities and neighborhood, among every ethnicity and nation, living faithfully within our particular cultures and trusting God to weave out of our faithfulness the cosmic redemption he has promised and accomplished through his Son. Which is to say, we will be ‘the church.’<sup>11</sup> That’s the kind of church we at Irving Bible Church are striving to become these days—a gathering of ambassadors of reconciliation and place-makers of shalom and the “Cellists of Dallas/Ft. Worth.” Our commitment has emboldened us to take “A Transformed People, A Transformed City” as our immediate goal. It has also fortified our resolve to fulfill our “unofficially official” church motto in sometimes crazy, risky ways.

“We want to be such a blessing to our neighbors that, if money problems ever made us shut our doors, people in our parish would raise the funds to keep us in business.”

That’s precisely what IBCer Jessie Yearwood did in the weeks following the July 7, 2016, shooting tragedy in which five Dallas police officers were killed and nine injured while, ironically, protecting thousands who were protesting police that day. The horrific tragedy began on Dallas’s Main Street and ended at El Centro College, where Jessie has been a longtime teacher and president of the faculty association. In the days that followed, she was one of the few people allowed on campus while the FBI conducted its investigation. That’s when, sensing great need, Jessie responded as a place-maker of peace. As the campus reopened to staff, Jessie organized a team of faculty to create a special “shalom” experience. Local restaurants had brought so much food to feed the investigators that Jessie’s team was able to take the leftovers and set up long tables designed to help their colleagues “lighten the load over a meal.” “No one was allowed to come pick up food and leave,” she says, “everyone had to stay and talk and connect.” Jessie called the tables “healing tables,” and they lived up to their name as the hospitality and conversations people experienced there jump-started the entire healing process at El Centro. Now a year later, Jessie explains her “Cellist of Sarajevo” heart as someone God used to bring shalom to hurting people. “On campus, I’m a secret agent, so to speak. Teaching is a cover for the relationships that I build. Those people eventually move on and build their lives, and that’s okay. The Lord just intersects where He needs to.” Here’s how IBC’s Pastor of Communications, Scott McClellan, who interviewed Jessie for this story, concluded his blog: “At the end of our conversation, I asked Jessie if she’d be open to me sharing her story with the people of IBC. She paused for a moment, then

agreed on one condition: 'If it helps the body understand that we don't have to be special in terms of how God shows up when we don't expect him to. And if it helps people see how the mission of God shows up in these unusual ways.' . . . We can't control when or where tragedy will strike in a broken world, but we can set tables of healing amid the wreckage and watch God work."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed we can set tables. Indeed we must. Our calling as God's people is to be place-makers of peace, cellists of Sarajevo, setters of tables of healing amid the wreckage of our broken world. The good news about this for me is that my newly realized calling, as far as I can see, is a game changer, because it omits any immediate trips back to jail and keeps me intrepid in the meantime. I hope it will be so for you as well! May the beauty and specificity of God's calling to plant gardens (instead of building walls) generate courage in your soul, because to make places of peace in the sometimes chaotic, ugly, and even dangerous places in our lives and world requires us to be not only energetic, but brave. So my friends, let's hoist our cellos into the bomb crater and play our hearts out for the beat-down people gathered there, for blessed are those who fulfill God's call to be blessings as place-makers of peace.

Shalom.