SMALL GROUP LEADERS' GUIDE

Understanding Peace

A theology and practice of peace — for leaders who want to teach it well, experience it deeply, and help their communities become genuinely peacemaking people.

By Patrick Connolly · 2026

THREE QUESTIONS THIS GUIDE ANSWERS

1. What is peace — biblically, theologically, and experientially?
2. How do I experience peace when my circumstances are not peaceful?
3. How do I become a peacemaker — in my relationships, my community, the world?

How to Use This Guide

You are holding a reference, not a workbook. It is designed to be returned to — at the beginning of a series, in the middle of a difficult conversation with your group, in a personal season where peace feels far away. Every chapter has two orientations: one for your own soul, and one for your group.

SECTION TYPE	WHAT IT IS FOR
FOR YOUR OWN SOUL	Each chapter contains reflection questions for your personal devotion. The leader who has not wrestled with these questions personally cannot guide others through them. Do not skip this layer.
FOR YOUR GROUP	Each chapter contains discussion questions calibrated for small group use. They are designed to create honest conversation — not to produce correct answers.
THEOLOGY NOTES	Boxed sections go deeper into the original languages, biblical context, or doctrinal background. Use these to build your own confidence, and share selectively with groups who want depth.
LEADER ALERTS	Red-bordered sections flag the common mistakes, misunderstandings, and pastoral challenges that arise when teaching this topic. Know them before your group finds them.

A word about the topic itself. Peace is one of the most used and least understood words in the Christian vocabulary. It has been co-opted by culture to mean comfort, by politics to mean absence of conflict, and by religion to mean emotional calm. None of these are the biblical picture. The biblical vision of peace is far more costly, far more structural, and far more glorious than any of them. This guide is designed to give your community that vision — and to begin the long work of living into it.

> *“Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.”*
>
> **John 14:27**

Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (public domain).

PART ONE

The Theology of Peace

What peace actually means — the words, the story, the foundation

CHAPTER ONE

The Vocabulary of Peace

Shalom, Eirene, and why the words change everything

Before we can teach peace, we need to know what word we're actually using. The English word 'peace' is doing the work of two distinct Hebrew and Greek concepts that are richer, more structural, and more demanding than their translation suggests. Getting this right changes everything that follows.

Shalom: The Hebrew Foundation

The Hebrew word **shalom** (שלום) appears over 250 times in the Old Testament. It is one of the most theologically loaded words in the Hebrew Bible. Its semantic range is stunning:

- **Wholeness and completeness:** Nothing missing, nothing broken. Not the absence of conflict but the *presence of everything that ought to be there.*
- **Flourishing:** Shalom is frequently used to describe a thriving community, a productive land, a life in which all the created goods of existence are present and integrated.
- **Right relationships:** Shalom describes the relational fabric of a community in which each person stands in proper relationship to God, to others, and to creation.
- **Restoration:** When shalom is absent, the prophets describe it as a tear in the fabric. When the Messiah comes, shalom is what is restored.

> **Word study: Shalom**
>
> The root of shalom (shin-lamed-mem) carries the idea of completion and wholeness. It is the word used in Genesis when something is complete, in Deuteronomy for a whole-hearted devotion, in Jeremiah's famous letter to the exiles (29:7) to describe the welfare of the city. When Isaiah calls the coming Messiah 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6), he is not promising a serene inner feeling. He is announcing someone who will restore everything that is broken.

Eirene: The Greek Complement

In the New Testament, the Greek word **eirene** (εἰρήνη) translates shalom but carries its own nuances. In the Greco-Roman world, eirene meant the absence of war, often associated with the Pax Romana — a political peace maintained by superior military force. The New

Testament writers take this word and fill it with the shalom content of the Old Testament, producing a concept that far exceeds either original meaning.

Eirene in the New Testament describes:

- **Peace with God:** The reconciled relationship between a holy God and sinful humanity (Romans 5:1). This is the foundational usage.
- **The peace of God:** An experiential reality — the 'peace of God, which surpasses all understanding' that guards the heart of the believer (Philippians 4:7).
- **Peace as community:** The unity of the body of Christ, Jews and Gentiles made one new humanity (Ephesians 2:14-17). Peace is the name for what the cross produces in human community.
- **Peacemaking:** The active, costly work of reconciliation that characterises the sons of God (Matthew 5:9).

Peace WITH God	Peace OF God	Peace AS Mission
Romans 5:1	*Philippians 4:7*	*Matthew 5:9*
Justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. The starting point.	A guard over heart and mind. Experiential. Received through prayer and gratitude.	Blessed are the peacemakers. Active, outward, costly. The work of God's children.

Leader alert: The most common mistake

Almost every group you lead will begin with a functional definition of peace that means one of two things: *absence of conflict* or *inner calm.* Neither is wrong, but both are far too small. The absence of conflict is not shalom — it is often the peace of suppression, avoidance, or power imbalance. And inner calm, while a genuine fruit of the Spirit, is not the whole picture.

Do not correct this too early. Let the group name their understanding, take it seriously, and then use the word study to expand it from the inside. The correction that lands is the one that feels like discovery, not instruction.

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• What has peace meant to you before reading this chapter? Where did that definition come from?

• Which dimension of shalom — wholeness, flourishing, right relationships, or restoration — is most absent from your own life right now?

• Where do you most need the peace that is a restored relationship, not just a calmed feeling?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. When you hear the word ‘peace,’ what image comes to mind first? Where did that image come from?

2. What is the difference between peace as ‘absence of conflict’ and peace as ‘shalom’? What changes if we adopt the fuller definition?

3. In your community, your family, your neighbourhood — where is shalom most absent? What would restoration look like, specifically?

4. The Pax Romana was peace maintained by force. Jesus announces a different kind of peace. What is fundamentally different about it?

CHAPTER TWO

The Arc of Peace

How the whole story of Scripture is a peace story

Peace is not a topic in the Bible. It is the *plotline*. The entire narrative of Scripture — from the garden to the new creation — is the story of shalom lost and shalom restored. Once you see this, you cannot unsee it, and it changes how you read almost every passage.

Act One: Shalom as Design (Creation)

The opening chapters of Genesis describe a world in which everything is in right relationship. God and humanity, humanity and each other, humanity and creation. The word 'good' in Genesis 1 is not primarily an aesthetic judgment — it is a relational one. Everything is in its proper place, properly related, properly ordered. This is shalom.

The garden is not primarily a place of beauty or comfort. It is a place of **undisturbed communion**. God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. There is no fear, no hiding, no shame. This is what shalom looks like when it is fully intact.

> *"And God looked upon all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good."*
>
> **Genesis 1:31**

Act Two: Shalom Fractured (The Fall)

Genesis 3 is one of the most precisely observed pieces of narrative in all of literature. The immediate consequences of the fall are not first of all pain or hardship — they are **broken relationships**. Adam and Eve hide from God. They blame each other. They are expelled from the garden. The ground itself becomes resistant. Every relational bond is fractured: human/divine, human/human, human/creation.

This is not metaphor. It is diagnosis. The structure of the fall describes exactly the structure of every human problem: **shalom's absence is always relational before it is circumstantial**. We experience it as conflict, as anxiety, as meaninglessness, as isolation. But the root is always the same fracture.

Before the Fall — Shalom Intact	After the Fall — Shalom Fractured
Open communion with God	Hiding from God (Gen 3:8)
Harmonious human relationship	Blame and shame between Adam and Eve (Gen 3:12)
Dignity and identity secure	Shame requiring covering (Gen 3:7)
Fruitful relationship with creation	Toil and resistance from the ground (Gen 3:17-19)
Life and presence	Death and exile (Gen 3:23-24)

Act Three: Shalom Promised (The Prophets)

The prophets are the great announcers of peace. Isaiah's vision of the coming Messiah — the Prince of Peace — is not a prediction of a calm spiritual feeling. It is a vision of **restored cosmic order**: the wolf and the lamb, the child and the cobra, the mountain of the Lord where all nations stream and swords become ploughshares. This is shalom language. It is structural, social, ecological.

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon (29:7) gives one of the most striking peace commands in all of Scripture: seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you. Not the city of your people. Not the holy city. The city of your exile. The city of your oppressors. God's people are to be **agents of shalom in hostile contexts** — not because the context deserves it, but because it is the nature of God's people to make things flourish wherever they are.

> **Key prophetic peace texts for your own study**
>
> Isaiah 9:6-7 — the Messiah as Prince of Peace, whose government and peace will never end
>
> Isaiah 52:7 — 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace'
>
> Isaiah 65:17-25 — the new creation vision, the full restoration of shalom
>
> Jeremiah 29:7 — seek the shalom of the city
>
> Micah 4:1-5 — swords into ploughshares, every person under their vine and fig tree
>
> Ezekiel 37:26 — a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant

Act Four: Shalom Embodied (The Incarnation)

When the angels announce the birth of Jesus, their announcement is a shalom announcement: *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests!'* (Luke 2:14). This is not a generic wish for tranquility. It is the announcement that the peace God promised through the prophets is arriving in person.

Jesus' ministry is a sustained demonstration of what shalom looks like in practice. He crosses boundaries that divide — Jew/Samaritan, clean/unclean, insider/outsider. He restores what is broken — physically, relationally, spiritually. He names the peacemakers as blessed. He tells his disciples that his peace is not like the world's peace. And then he goes to the cross.

Ephesians 2:14 says something remarkable: *'For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has torn down the dividing wall of hostility'* Jesus does not merely *bring* peace as a gift. He **is** our peace. The person of Christ is the location where divided humanity becomes one. The cross is not just the mechanism of individual forgiveness — it is the **structural end of enmity**.

Act Five: Shalom Consummated (New Creation)

The Bible ends where it begins — but more so. Revelation 21-22 describes a new creation in which God dwells with his people, every tear is wiped away, and the shalom of the garden is restored and exceeded. The city of God has no temple — because the whole city is the

temple. There is no sea — in Hebrew cosmology, the sea represented chaos and threat. There is no night — no hiddenness or fear.

This is not escapism. It is the **destination that gives the present its meaning**. The work of peace in the present — in our relationships, our communities, our world — is not temporary. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that our labour in the Lord is not in vain. The New Testament scholar N.T. Wright argues that what we build in the present on the foundation of Christ will be carried over into the new creation. Peace work is eternal work.

> **FOR YOUR OWN SOUL**
>
> • Where in your own life do you feel the fracture of Genesis 3 most acutely?
>
> • The prophets saw shalom as social and structural, not merely personal. Where does this challenge your understanding of what 'being at peace' means?
>
> • What would it look like for you to seek the shalom of the 'city' you are currently in?

> **FOR YOUR GROUP**
>
> 1. If the whole Bible is a peace story, how does naming it that way change how you read familiar passages?
>
> 2. What is the difference between the Pax Romana (peace through dominance) and the peace Jesus announces? Where do we see the Pax Romana operating today?
>
> 3. Ephesians 2:14 says Jesus 'is our peace' — not just that he brings peace. What is the difference, and why does it matter?
>
> 4. Where in your neighbourhood, workplace, or family is shalom most fractured? What would it mean to be an agent of restoration there?

CHAPTER THREE

Peace with God

The foundation on which everything else rests

Every other dimension of peace in the Christian life rests on one prior reality: **peace with God.** Not peace about God. Not peace alongside God. Peace *with* God — a restored relationship where the enmity has been removed and full access has been granted.

> *"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"*
>
> **Romans 5:1**

The Problem: What Enmity Actually Means

Paul's language in Romans and Ephesians is striking in its directness. He does not say humanity has drifted from God, or that the relationship has grown cold. He says the mind of the flesh is *hostile to God* (Romans 8:7), that we were *enemies* (Romans 5:10), that we were *separate from Christ … without hope and without God in the world* (Ephesians 2:12). This is not gentle language. It is the language of estrangement, hostility, and structural exclusion.

This matters for how we understand what peace with God *is*. It is not merely a warm feeling about our relationship with God. It is the **removal of a real barrier**. The veil torn in two. The wall of hostility demolished. Access granted. This is not primarily an emotional reality — it is a legal, relational, and structural one.

The Solution: Justification as Peace

Romans 5:1 connects peace with God directly to justification: *since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God.* These are not two separate events. They are one event seen from two angles. Justification is the verdict — righteous before God. Peace with God is the **relational consequence of that verdict**: the enmity is removed, the hostility ends, access is granted, the relationship is restored.

> **Theology note: Justification and peace**
>
> The Greek verb for 'justified' in Romans 5:1 (dikaioo) is a forensic term — it is the language of a law court. God declares the believer righteous, not because they are, but because Christ's righteousness is credited to them. This is the Reformation discovery of imputed righteousness. The peace that follows is not earned by behaviour — it is received as a gift, resting on Christ's work, not our own. This means peace with God is as secure as the verdict that produces it — and the verdict will not be reversed.

The Implication: Peace with God as Unshakeable Foundation

If peace with God is secured by Christ's finished work — not by our performance, our feelings, or our circumstances — then it is available to us in every condition of life. The

believer who is anxious has not lost peace with God. The believer who is suffering has not forfeited peace with God. The believer who has failed has not broken peace with God. The foundation is **outside themselves** and therefore **outside the reach of circumstances**.

This is not cheap comfort. It is the most solid ground available. And it is the only ground from which the other dimensions of peace — the experiential peace in hard circumstances, the active work of peacemaking — can be pursued with genuine courage. You can only risk making peace in the world when your own peace is not at stake.

Leader alert: Grace vs. works confusion

This chapter almost always produces one of two pastoral situations. The first is the person who struggles to feel peace with God because they do not feel forgiven — their sense of peace is tied to their performance. The second is the person who uses peace with God as a bypass — using assured forgiveness to avoid genuine repentance and change.

Both need the same correction but from different directions. For the first: peace with God is a verdict, not a feeling. For the second: that verdict is designed to produce, not replace, genuine transformation. The peace of the cross is meant to produce peace-makers, not peace-consumers.

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• When do you find it hardest to feel at peace with God? What drives that difficulty?

• Peace with God is described as a present possession (‘we have peace’) — not something to achieve. What does it take for you to actually live from that reality rather than toward it?

• How would your leadership of this group change if you led from a secure peace with God rather than from performance anxiety?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. What is the difference between feeling at peace about your relationship with God and actually having peace with God? Why does the distinction matter?

2. Paul says we ‘have’ peace with God — present tense, settled reality. What makes it hard to live as if this is true?

3. If peace with God is the foundation of everything else, what happens when someone tries to build the other dimensions of peace without this one?

4. Where in your life are you performing for God rather than resting in your peace with God? What would it look like to stop?

PART TWO

The Experience of Peace

How peace operates in a real life with real suffering

CHAPTER FOUR

The Peace That Passes Understanding

Philippians 4 and the guarded heart

Paul writes his most detailed account of experiential peace from prison. This is not incidental. It is the entire point. The peace he describes is not available to someone whose circumstances are manageable — that is not peace, it is comfort. The peace he describes is available *regardless of circumstances*, which means it must have a source outside circumstances.

> *"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*
>
> **Philippians 4:6–7**

The Command: Do Not Be Anxious

The command not to be anxious (*mēden merimnate*) is not a call to suppress emotions or perform contentment. In its original context, it is a re-orientation of concern: instead of directing your concern toward the problem, direct it toward God. Anxiety is not forbidden because it is weak — it is redirected because it is **misdirected attention**. The problem is not that you care. The problem is that you are directing your care into the wrong channel.

The Practice: Prayer and Petition with Thanksgiving

Paul specifies three elements that together produce the peace response: **prayer** (general orientation toward God), **petition** (specific requests), and **thanksgiving** (acknowledgment of what God has already done). The thanksgiving element is not optional liturgy. It is the cognitive reframe that makes peace possible: you cannot genuinely give thanks for what God has done while simultaneously believing God is unable to handle your current situation.

The psychology of gratitude (a pastoral tool)

The psychological research on gratitude is consistent with Paul's prescription. In a well-known set of experiments, people who regularly wrote down things they were grateful for reported greater well-being than those who listed hassles or neutral events (Emmons & McCullough, 2003, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(2), 377–389). Gratitude practices are also commonly used to interrupt rumination and shift attention from threat to resource. This is not a replacement for the theological reality — it is confirmation that the created order responds to the practices God prescribes.

The Promise: The Peace That Guards

The peace that God gives in response to this practice is described in two ways. First, it **surpasses all understanding** — it operates beyond the level of reason. You cannot think your way into it. It is received, not constructed. Second, it **guards** (*phrourēsei*) the heart and mind. This is a military metaphor — a sentry standing at the gate. Paul is describing a peace that actively protects the person from the anxiety that would otherwise flood in.

Notice what the peace guards: *heart and mind*. Both the affective and the cognitive. The peace of God is not just a feeling of calm — it is a settled state of both the emotional interior and the thinking mind. A person at this level of peace can feel grief, fear, and uncertainty without being **overwhelmed** by them.

The Mind: The Renewal That Sustains Peace

Paul follows the Philippians 4 passage with one of the most practically important instructions in the letter: *'Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think on these things'* (Philippians 4:8).

This is not positive thinking as a spiritual discipline. It is a **deliberate training of attention**. Anxiety is fundamentally a pattern of attention — it fixes on threat, catastrophises, replays. The renewal of the mind (Romans 12:2) is the disciplined redirection of attention toward what is true, good, and real. It does not deny the presence of threat. It refuses to give threat the final word.

PHILIPPIANS 4 PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

Four moves toward guarded peace

- Name the anxiety specifically — do not let it remain vague and ambient
- Redirect it to God in specific prayer and petition — naming what you are actually asking for
- Add thanksgiving for three concrete, specific things God has already done
- Fix your mind deliberately on what is true and good in your current situation

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• What is the anxiety you most consistently return to? What specifically are you afraid of?

• When you pray about this anxiety, do you experience the peace of God? If not — what is missing from your practice?

• What is the difference between suppressing anxiety (pretending it's not there) and redirecting it through prayer? Which do you more often do?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. Paul commands 'Be anxious for nothing' from prison. What makes that command meaningful rather than dismissive of real suffering?

2. What is the role of thanksgiving in the peace practice? What happens to the peace when gratitude is absent?

3. What does your mind default to when it is not deliberately directed? What would it look like to train your attention differently?

4. Have any of you experienced this kind of peace in a hard situation? What made it possible?

CHAPTER FIVE

Peace and Suffering

The paradox Jesus warned us about

The most pastorally important thing a small group leader can know about peace is this: **biblical peace does not promise the absence of trouble.** Jesus is explicit. He says, *'In the world you will have tribulation'* (John 16:33). Not might have. Will have. The peace he offers coexists with trouble — it does not replace it.

> *"I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take courage; I have overcome the world!"*
>
> **John 16:33**

The Paradox: Peace Alongside Suffering

The New Testament holds an extraordinary tension: believers are promised genuine peace, and they are promised genuine suffering. Both promises are real. They are not in tension — they are, as Paul puts it, *'sorrowful, yet always rejoicing'* (2 Corinthians 6:10). This is not psychological compartmentalisation. It is the result of having a foundation that suffering cannot reach.

The person who has only experienced peace when circumstances are good has not yet discovered what biblical peace is. It is in the hard seasons that the difference becomes visible — the difference between the person whose peace is based on their situation and the person whose peace is based on a reality that outlasts their situation.

Hebrews 12: The Discipline of Peace

Hebrews 12 introduces a dimension of peace that is deeply uncomfortable for contemporary Christianity: the idea that God uses suffering as formation. The writer quotes Proverbs: *'For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He chastises every son He receives'* (Hebrews 12:6). The Greek word for 'discipline' here is *paideia* — not punishment, but **formation**. It is the word used for the education and training of children.

The writer does not say that suffering is pleasant or that we should pretend it is. He says it is *'painful'*. But he also says it 'yields a harvest of righteousness and peace' for those who have been trained by it. The peace at the end of the discipline is the product of the discipline — not despite it but through it. **Suffering under God's hand is not the interruption of peace. It is sometimes its curriculum.**

Leader alert: The pastoral minefield

This chapter must be taught with extreme care. There are at least three ways it can go wrong:

- **Spiritual bypassing:** Using ‘God is in control’ to avoid entering someone’s genuine pain. The person who is suffering needs presence before they need theology.
- **Toxic positivity:** Implying that the person’s suffering is just a matter of perspective or insufficient faith. Suffering is real. Do not minimize it.
- **Over-attribution:** Telling someone their suffering is definitely God’s discipline. We do not always know why someone is suffering. Sometimes neither do they. Humility is required.

The way through: enter the suffering first, stay there longer than is comfortable, and let the theology of peace emerge from within the pain rather than being applied from outside it. Jesus wept before he raised Lazarus.

Paul’s Secret: Contentment as Learned Discipline

One of the most misquoted verses in the New Testament is Philippians 4:13: *‘I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.’* Read in context, ‘all things’ refers specifically to Paul’s experience of both abundance and want. He is not promising success in every endeavour. He is describing a **learned capacity to be at peace in any condition**.

The key word is *learned* (*mematheka* — I have learned, past tense, through experience). Contentment — and the peace that underlies it — is not a character trait you either have or don’t. It is a discipline developed through the practice of entrusting difficult circumstances to God and discovering that he can be trusted with them. **You cannot shortcut this. It requires actually going through hard things.**

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• What is the hardest season you have been through? Looking back: was there peace available that you did not access, or that you discovered only later?

• Where are you currently trying to manufacture peace by managing circumstances, rather than receiving peace despite them?

• Is there suffering in your life that you have not yet offered to God as curriculum? What is preventing you?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. Jesus says ‘In the world you will have tribulation’ as a setup for ‘But take courage.’ What is he actually promising, and what is he not promising?

2. What is the difference between peace that depends on circumstances being resolved, and peace that coexists with unresolved circumstances?

3. Paul says he ‘learned’ contentment. What did he have to go through to learn it? What is the curriculum for us?

4. How do we create space in our group for people to be honest about suffering without either fixing it prematurely or leaving people without hope?

CHAPTER SIX

Peace as Fruit

How peace grows in a life surrendered to the Spirit

Peace appears in Galatians 5:22 as part of the fruit of the Spirit — not a spiritual technique, not a theological belief alone, but a **growth outcome**. The word 'fruit' is significant. Fruit is not manufactured. It is grown. It is the natural product of a living thing that is healthy, rooted, and receiving what it needs.

> *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."*
>
> **Galatians 5:22–23**

Fruit vs. Works: The Critical Distinction

The passage is 'fruit of the Spirit' — not *works of the Spirit*, not *disciplines of the Spirit*. Fruit grows. It is not constructed. This matters enormously for how we pursue peace. The person who is **striving** to be peaceful is like a tree trying to grow its own apples. The striving is itself the wrong kind of activity. What is required is a different kind of engagement — the surrender that allows the Spirit to produce what only the Spirit can produce.

This does not mean passivity. The gardener does not grow the fruit — but the gardener does prepare the soil, remove the weeds, ensure the roots have water. There is cooperative human activity in the production of spiritual fruit. But the activity is not the striving of performance. It is the tending of **conditions that allow growth**.

The Conditions: What Allows Peace to Grow

What are the conditions in which peace — as a fruit of the Spirit — grows? The New Testament gives a consistent answer across multiple texts:

- **Abiding:** John 15 describes the relationship between the vine and the branches. The fruit comes from remaining connected. Disconnection — through sin, through neglect of prayer, through isolation from the community — is the condition in which fruit withers.
- **Renewing the mind:** Romans 12:2 connects transformation to the renewing of the mind. The peace that grows is shaped by what the mind is being fed. Habits of attention matter.
- **Walking in step with the Spirit:** Galatians 5:25 calls believers to *walk in step* with the Spirit — a military metaphor for deliberate, responsive alignment. Not just initial surrender but ongoing responsiveness.
- **Community:** Colossians 3:15 says 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, for to this you were called as members of one body.' Peace is described as something the body grows together, not in isolation.

Conditions that GROW peace	Conditions that WITHER peace
Regular, honest prayer	Prayer replaced by anxious thought
Scripture feeding the mind	Media diet of threat and outrage
Community of genuine honesty	Isolation or performed connection
Gratitude as a practice	Habitual comparison and complaint
Confession and repentance	Unresolved sin and self-justification
Trust expressed through obedience	Attempts to control outcomes

The Test: Peace as a Leadership Diagnostic

For small group leaders specifically, the fruit of peace functions as a diagnostic. Not of your circumstances — of your inner condition before God. A leader who consistently lacks peace is a leader who is either disconnected from the vine, or operating from a fear base rather than a love base, or carrying burdens they have not yet surrendered.

This is not condemnation. It is invitation. The question the Spirit asks is not *'why aren't you more peaceful?'* It is: *'What is the thing you have not yet brought to me?'*

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• What are the conditions in your current life that are growing peace? What conditions are withering it?

• Is there something you are striving to be rather than surrendering to the Spirit? How does that striving feel, and what does it produce?

• What would change in your leadership of this group if you led from a genuinely peaceful inner state rather than an anxious one?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. What is the difference between striving for peace and creating conditions for peace to grow? Is this an important distinction?

2. Which of the four conditions for peace growth (abiding, mind renewal, walking in step, community) is most underdeveloped in your life?

3. Colossians 3:15 describes peace as something the community grows together. What does that look like practically in a small group?

4. When peace is absent in your life, what does its absence tell you? What does it usually point to?

PART THREE

The Practice of Peacemaking

The outward, costly, active work of the children of God

CHAPTER SEVEN

Peacemakers, Not Peacekeepers

The beatitude that changes everything about how you handle conflict

Matthew 5:9 says: *'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.'* Not the peace-keepers. Not the peace-lovers. Not the peace-wishers. **Peacemakers**. The distinction is one of the most important in the entire guide. Peacekeeping and peacemaking look similar from the outside. They are opposites from the inside.

PEACEKEEPING	PEACEMAKING
Avoids conflict to preserve surface calm	Enters conflict to produce genuine reconciliation
Prioritises comfort over truth	Speaks truth in love, knowing it may be painful
Manages symptoms	Addresses roots
The goal is the absence of tension	The goal is restored relationship
Protects self from the cost of engagement	Absorbs the cost of engagement on behalf of others
Produces temporary quiet	Produces lasting shalom
Jesus did not model this	Jesus modelled this at the cross

What Peacemaking Costs

Every genuine act of peacemaking involves someone absorbing a cost that justice would assign to someone else. This is the logic of the cross. Jesus does not resolve the enmity between God and humanity by declaring it doesn't matter. He resolves it by absorbing the full weight of what it costs, in himself, so that others don't have to bear it.

This is the pattern for all genuine peacemaking. The parent who reconciles with an adult child who has caused genuine harm. The leader who takes responsibility for a failure that was partially someone else's. The person who apologises first in a conflict where they were only partially wrong. In every case, they are absorbing a cost that could legitimately have been assigned elsewhere.

This is why Jesus calls the peacemakers *blessed* — not because it is easy, but because it is **the work of people who have understood the cross**. And this is why it is the peacemakers who are called sons of God — because they resemble their Father most closely in this specific act.

> *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God."*
>
> **Matthew 5:9**

The Romans 12:18 Qualifier

Paul adds a crucial qualifier to the peacemaking call in Romans 12:18: *'If it is possible on your part, live at peace with everyone.'* Two qualifiers: **'if it is possible'** and **'on your part.'**

Peacemaking is not reconciliation at any cost. Sometimes it is not possible — the other party may be abusive, dangerous, or unwilling. **Peace is not the same as the absence of boundaries**. A person who tolerates ongoing harm to preserve surface calm is not making peace — they are colluding with harm. The peacemaking call includes the wisdom to know when reconciliation is genuinely possible and when safety or justice requires distance.

> **Leader alert: Peace and abuse**
>
> This is the most critical pastoral edge of the entire guide. Romans 12:18's qualifier exists for a reason. Someone in your group may be using peace language to justify staying in a genuinely harmful situation. 'I'm trying to be a peacemaker' is sometimes the language of someone who is afraid to leave, not someone who is called to stay.
>
> Know the difference. Peacemaking does not require the target of abuse to absorb the abuser's cost. The cross does not mean the vulnerable should sacrifice themselves for the comfort of the powerful. If this dynamic is present in your group, it requires direct pastoral care, not a theological discussion.

> **FOR YOUR OWN SOUL**
>
> • Where in your relationships are you peacekeeping instead of peacemaking? What is the cost you are avoiding?
>
> • Is there a conflict you are being called to enter rather than manage? What is preventing you?
>
> • What would it look like to be a person who 'absorbs cost' in your relational world this week?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. What is a situation in your community — family, church, workplace — where peacekeeping is being mistaken for peacemaking?

2. What does it cost to be a genuine peacemaker? Can you name a specific time when someone absorbed that cost on your behalf?

3. Romans 12:18 says ‘if it is possible.’ When is reconciliation not possible? What does faithfulness look like then?

4. Jesus is called the Prince of Peace — and his path to that title went through the cross. What does that tell us about the path to genuine peace in our relationships?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Peace in Relationships

Matthew 18, Romans 12, and the practice of reconciliation

If the previous chapter established the theology of peacemaking, this one gets specific: what does it actually look like when you are in a real conflict with a real person and you want to pursue genuine peace rather than managed distance?

Matthew 18: The Jesus Protocol for Conflict

Matthew 18:15-20 is Jesus' most specific teaching on how to handle conflict within the community. It is so specific that it should be memorised by every small group leader. The sequence is deliberate and ordered:

1. **Go directly to the person.** Not to mutual friends. Not to social media. Not to the pastor. To the person. Privately. The first move in biblical peacemaking is always the most direct route available.
2. **If they will not listen, bring one or two others.** The witnesses serve two functions: they prevent misremembering on both sides, and they invite accountability into the process. This step requires significant relational courage.
3. **If they still will not listen, bring it to the church.** Community accountability is the penultimate step — not the first resort. Most conflicts never need to reach this level. But the protocol exists because some do.
4. **If they refuse to listen even to the church.** Then the relationship enters a different posture. Even here, the goal is eventual restoration, not permanent exclusion.

> **Why the sequence matters**
>
> The sequence in Matthew 18 is designed to protect both parties. Direct confrontation prevents the spread of gossip and gives the person the dignity of private accountability before public exposure. Each step escalates only when the previous one fails. The goal at every stage is the same: 'If he listens to you, you have won your brother over' (v.15). The win is restored relationship, not vindication.

Romans 12: The Posture of Peacemaking

Romans 12 surrounds the peace command with a set of relational postures that function as the soil in which peacemaking can grow:

- **'Bless those who persecute you' (v.14):** Active goodwill toward those who have wronged you. Not passive tolerance. Not managed resentment. Active goodwill.
- **'Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep' (v.15):** Genuine emotional attunement. You cannot make peace with someone you are not genuinely present to.
- **'Do not repay anyone evil for evil' (v.17):** The cycle of retaliation is the enemy of peace. Breaking it requires absorbing the cost of not retaliating.

- **‘Do not avenge yourselves’ (v.19):** Leave space for God’s judgment. The person who is pursuing revenge has appointed themselves judge. The person who leaves room for God is free to pursue reconciliation instead.
- **‘overcome evil with good’ (v.21):** The final word. Peace is not just the absence of evil. It is the active displacement of evil with good. This is the positive, creative dimension of peacemaking.

The Apology that Heals vs. the Apology that Manages

Not all apologies produce peace. The apology designed to end the discomfort of conflict — *‘I’m sorry you feel that way’* or *‘I’m sorry, but…’* — is a peacekeeping move, not a peacemaking one. It manages surface tension without addressing the underlying fracture.

A genuine apology that contributes to peace has several identifiable elements: it **names the specific wrong** (not a vague general acknowledgment), it **takes full ownership** without qualification, it **expresses understanding of the harm caused**, and it **does not require a response** from the other person. The genuine apology is an act of peacemaking even if the other person does not accept it. It clears your side of the breach regardless of what they do with theirs.

> **FOR YOUR OWN SOUL**
>
> • Is there a relationship in which you have been managing distance rather than pursuing genuine reconciliation? What is the cost of that distance?
>
> • When you are in conflict, what is your default move? Does it match Matthew 18’s sequence?
>
> • What apology do you owe someone that you have been avoiding? What is stopping you?

> **FOR YOUR GROUP**
>
> 1. Walk through the Matthew 18 sequence. At what step do most conflicts in your experience get handled? What happens when we skip steps?
>
> 2. What makes the difference between an apology that genuinely contributes to reconciliation and one that manages conflict without resolving it?
>
> 3. Romans 12:21 says to ‘overcome evil with good.’ What does that look like in a specific conflict situation — not generically, but concretely?
>
> 4. Who in your group has experience of genuine reconciliation in a difficult relationship? What made it possible?

CHAPTER NINE

Shalom and the World

The broader vision — peace for communities, cities, and creation

The vision of shalom in Scripture is not a private, interior phenomenon. It is cosmic in scope. Jeremiah tells the exiles to seek the shalom of the entire city. Isaiah sees a day when nations stream to the mountain of the Lord. Revelation pictures a new creation in which the kings of the earth bring their glory into the city of God. **Biblical peace is always moving outward**.

Jeremiah's Political Theology of Peace

Jeremiah 29 may be the most surprising peace text in the Old Testament. God's people are in exile in Babylon — the empire that conquered them, destroyed their city, killed their leaders. And God tells them: build houses, plant gardens, get married, have children. And: *'Seek the prosperity of the city to which I have sent you as exiles. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for if it prospers, you too will prosper'* (Jeremiah 29:7). The word translated 'prosperity' is *shalom*.

This is a startling command. Not *endure* the city. Not *withdraw from* the city. **Seek its shalom.** Pray for it. Invest in it. Contribute to it. Even when the city is hostile. Even when you did not choose to be there. This is the posture of God's people in the world: agents of shalom in the places they find themselves, for the good of people who may not acknowledge where that shalom comes from.

> *"Seek the prosperity of the city to which I have sent you as exiles. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for if it prospers, you too will prosper."*
>
> **Jeremiah 29:7**

Justice and Peace: The Twin Sisters

The Psalms repeatedly pair peace with justice — *'Loving devotion and faithfulness have joined together; righteousness and peace have kissed'* (Psalm 85:10). They are not the same thing. But they travel together. Peace without justice is appeasement. Justice without peace is revenge. **True shalom requires both**, which is why the work of peacemaking in the world is inseparable from the work of justice.

This means the small group leader who teaches this content is preparing their community for more than better personal relationships. They are preparing people to engage the brokenness of their city and their world as agents of shalom — people who care about poverty and racial reconciliation and environmental flourishing not as political commitments but as **shalom convictions**. The vision of the new creation is the vision they are working toward.

Where can your group seek the shalom of your city?

This is not a generic question. Identify the specific fractures in your local context:

- Who in your neighbourhood is isolated or overlooked?
- Where are relationships strained between groups — generations, cultures, newcomers and long-time residents?
- Where is economic hardship most visible, and who is already working on it?
- What part of your local environment is neglected or damaged?

Creation Care as Shalom Work

Genesis 2:15 says God placed humanity in the garden *'to cultivate and keep it'*. This is shalom language applied to the created order. The fracture of the fall affects the relationship between humanity and creation as well as the human/divine and human/human dimensions. Paul describes creation as groaning for its liberation (Romans 8:19-22), waiting for the revelation of the sons of God who will restore what was lost.

Care for creation is not a political add-on to the gospel. It is a shalom commitment. The people who understand that the new creation will be a *renewed* creation — not discarded but redeemed — have a reason to care for what currently exists that runs deeper than environmental ethics.

FOR YOUR OWN SOUL

• What is the 'city' — the specific community, neighbourhood, or context — in which you are currently placed? Are you seeking its shalom?

• Where is the relationship between justice and peace most challenging for you personally? Where do you lean toward one without the other?

• What would it look like for your group to be an outward-facing agent of shalom, not just an inward-facing community of growth?

FOR YOUR GROUP

1. Jeremiah tells the exiles to seek the shalom of Babylon. What would it mean for your group to seek the shalom of your specific city or neighbourhood?

2. Where do you see justice and peace in tension in your community? How do you hold both together?

3. What is one specific act of shalom your group could take together outside the walls of your meeting?

4. How does the vision of the new creation — not escape but renewal — change how you engage with the brokenness of the present world?

PART FOUR

The Leader’s Toolkit

Facilitating, forming, and sustaining a community of peace

CHAPTER TEN

Facilitating Peace Conversations

The craft of leading a group into honest, generative discussion

Teaching about peace is different from most topics because the content has an immediate application: the group is, in the moment of learning, a community that either practises peace or doesn’t. The way you lead the discussion is itself a demonstration of the content. You cannot teach psychological safety and then shame someone who gives the wrong answer.

Creating the Conditions for Honest Conversation

The research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) identifies specific leader behaviours that create conditions for honest conversation. In the context of a small group teaching on peace, these behaviours are both pedagogically necessary and theologically appropriate:

- **Model vulnerability first.** Before asking your group hard questions, answer one yourself. Authentically. Not a safe, pre-packaged answer — a real one. The leader who goes first lowers the cost of honesty for everyone else.
- **Name the discomfort.** When a question lands in silence, the facilitator who names what is happening (‘This is a hard one — I’ll give us a moment’) relieves the pressure of the silence without collapsing it.
- **Respond to honesty with curiosity, not solution.** When someone shares a genuine struggle, the pastoral instinct to fix it immediately is a form of not hearing them. Stay longer in the story before moving to the application.
- **Never punish honesty.** Even when someone says something theologically incorrect, the first response is not correction — it is engagement. Correction that feels like embarrassment will shut down honesty for the rest of the group’s life together.

The Hard Cases You Will Encounter

Every group has dynamics that make peace conversations difficult. Know these before you encounter them:

The person who says ‘I’ve prayed but I don’t feel peace’

This is the most common pastoral challenge in this series. Several possible roots: they may be confusing peace with the absence of anxiety (peace can coexist with anxiety); they may have unconfessed sin or an unresolved relational fracture that is blocking their experience;

they may be praying for God to change their circumstances rather than entrusting their circumstances to God; they may be in a season of genuine suffering where the peace is present but not felt. **Do not rush to diagnosis. Ask questions first.**

The peacekeeper who thinks they are a peacemaker

This person is conflict-averse, relationally warm, and often highly valued by the group. They will resist the peacekeeper/peacemaker distinction because it challenges a core part of their identity. They need the distinction to be offered gently but clearly, and they need to understand that the call to peacemaking is a call to greater courage, not an accusation of failure.

The person in an active relational conflict

Someone in your group is probably in a real conflict right now — with a spouse, a parent, a colleague, a former friend. The content of this series will land differently for them than for everyone else. They need both the theology and the pastoral accompaniment. They should not be singled out in the group, but they should be followed up with individually after sessions that touch their situation.

The person for whom 'peace' is triggering because they are not safe

As noted in Chapter 7, someone in your group may be in a genuinely harmful relationship and using peace language to explain why they are staying. If you suspect this, do not address it in the group. Address it privately. Their safety is not a theological discussion — it is a pastoral emergency.

> **FIVE FACILITATION QUESTIONS THAT ALWAYS WORK**
>
> **Keep these available for any session**
>
> • 'What is one word that comes to mind when you think about peace right now?' (opening, low-stakes)
>
> • 'Where do you feel the tension in this?' (surfacing honest struggle without naming it for them)
>
> • 'What would it actually look like in your specific situation?' (moving from abstract to concrete)
>
> • 'What is the cost of this for you?' (naming what genuine peacemaking requires)
>
> • 'What is one thing you want to carry with you from this conversation?' (closing, integrating)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A Formation Calendar

Weekly, monthly, and seasonal practices for a peace-shaped life

Peace is not achieved in a single study series. It is the gradual formation of a person who has practised, over years, the disciplines that allow peace to grow. What follows is a formation calendar — not a productivity system, but a rhythm of practices that align with the different rhythms of a year.

Weekly Practices

- **The daily redirect.** Once per day, name the anxiety that is most present. Bring it to God in specific prayer. Add one act of thanksgiving for something concrete. This is the Philippians 4 practice as a daily discipline.
- **The Sunday reorientation.** Use Sunday worship to reaffirm peace with God as the foundation. Receive Communion as a physical act of peace — the body of Christ broken to end the enmity, the blood of Christ poured out to ratify the new covenant.
- **The Friday relational audit.** Before the end of each week, ask: Is there anyone with whom my relationship is not in peace? Have I done what 'if it is possible on your part' (Romans 12:18) asks of me? If yes, make the contact. If not, confess it and ask for grace to move toward it next week.

Monthly Practices

- **A shalom inventory.** Once a month: where is my life most characterised by wholeness and flourishing? Where is it most fractured? What would restoration look like in the fractured area, and what is one step I could take toward it?
- **A neighbour question.** Jeremiah's call to seek the shalom of the city. Once a month, identify one person or community outside your immediate circle whose flourishing you can contribute to in a practical way.
- **A gratitude document.** Keep a running record of things for which you are genuinely grateful — specific, concrete, not generic. Review it once a month. This is not sentiment. It is the mental habit that sustains the peace practice.

Seasonal Practices (By Liturgical Season)

- **Advent:** Meditate on Isaiah's peace promises. The Prince of Peace is coming. Let the season re-calibrate your vision of what shalom fully restored will look like. Hold present fractures in the light of that vision.
- **Lent:** Examine where you are a peacekeeper rather than a peacemaker. Identify one relationship where you have been avoiding the cost of genuine reconciliation. Use the season to move toward it.
- **Easter:** Celebrate peace with God as the foundational reality of your life. The enmity is destroyed. The wall is down. Spend the fifty days of Eastertide practising living as if this

is fully true.

- **Ordinary Time:** The long middle of the year. This is where the habits either form or they don't. Return to the weekly and monthly practices. Do them even when they feel unremarkable. The fruit grows slowly and without fanfare.

> **FOR YOUR GROUP: A COMMUNITY COVENANT OF PEACE**
>
> **Consider developing a short covenant together**
>
> • We will speak directly to one another rather than about one another
>
> • We will seek genuine reconciliation rather than managed distance
>
> • We will be honest about our lack of peace rather than performing what we do not yet have
>
> • We will seek the shalom of the communities we are placed in
>
> • We will return to this covenant when we have broken it, rather than quietly forgetting it

Key Texts on Peace

A curated reference of the most important biblical texts on peace, organised by theme. These are the texts to know before teaching this series.

Peace with God (Foundation)

- **Romans 5:1** — justified through faith, we have peace with God
- **Romans 5:10** — reconciled to God while we were enemies
- **Ephesians 2:12–17** — Christ himself is our peace; the dividing wall of hostility destroyed
- **Isaiah 9:6–7** — the Messiah as Prince of Peace, whose government and peace will never end

The Peace of God (Experiential)

- **John 14:27** — "My peace I give to you", not as the world gives
- **John 16:33** — peace in Christ in a world of trouble
- **Philippians 4:6–7** — prayer and petition with thanksgiving; the peace that guards
- **Philippians 4:8** — what we set our minds on

Peace as Fruit (Formation)

- **Galatians 5:22–23** — peace as fruit of the Spirit
- **Galatians 5:25** — keeping in step with the Spirit
- **Colossians 3:15** — the peace of Christ ruling in a community called to peace

Peacemaking (Outward)

- **Matthew 5:9** — blessed are the peacemakers
- **Romans 12:18** — "If it is possible on your part"
- **Romans 12:21** — overcome evil with good

- **Matthew 18:15–20** — the sequence for repairing a broken relationship

Shalom in the World (Mission)

- **Jeremiah 29:7** — seek the shalom (prosperity) of the city
- **Psalm 85:10** — righteousness and peace have kissed
- **Micah 4:1–5** — swords into ploughshares, everyone under their vine and fig tree
- **Romans 8:19–22** — creation groaning for its liberation
- **Revelation 21–22** — the new creation: shalom restored

One final word for small group leaders. The content of this guide is only as effective as the person who teaches it. The group will not be led further into peace than the leader has gone. This is not pressure — it is invitation. Let the study form you first. Let the questions sit with you before you bring them to others. Lead from the overflow, not from the notes.

> *"Now may the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you."*
>
> **2 Thessalonians 3:16**

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