

Today is your lucky day? Did you know that?

Today is your lucky day because you, the members and friends of St. Paul's get a little lesson in Hebrew from your pastor.

Go ahead, indulge that little inner fist-pump you are all feeling. I bet most of you woke up today just hoping that your pastor was going to teach you some Hebrew. Like I said, today is your lucky day.

If you take a look in your service folder on the bottom of page 14 you will see our Hebrew lesson for today... ok, so it's only one word, but it's an important Hebrew word.

שָׁלוֹם – Shalom. On the left you see the Hebrew, and on the right is the word transliterated into an alphabet you can read... shalom.

What does shalom mean? The most common English translation is *peace*. But it isn't just peace as we often use it in English, the absence of war or conflict. No, the peace of shalom refers to a deep inner soundness, wholeness, and prosperity. It is a word that talks about those moments of absolute contentment and happiness that happen in life.

So you plan and execute a perfect Thanksgiving feast – everyone you love was able to make it, the food was great, the fellowship even better; stomachs are full, hearts even more so, everything is cleaned up and put away, you settle in to your favorite chair to watch some football, and you just exhale absolute contentment – that's shalom.

You plan and execute the perfect family vacation, you time it perfectly so that you fly to Florida and get to miss out on a week of "spring" like we just had here in Wisconsin this last week. You get there safe and sound, you unpack all your stuff, you go see some sights, and then after the end of a great but exhausting day you sit down on the deck of your hotel to watch the sun set over the Gulf of Mexico with a drink in your hand, your bride by your side, and you just exhale absolute contentment – that's shalom – that feeling of "I have everything I need, there is nothing I lack", a deep inner soundness, wholeness, and prosperity – peace.

Maybe some of you have seen or heard that word before. It is a very common word in Hebrew. It's how Jewish people say goodbye and hello and good afternoon – shalom... I hope you have this peace.

And I want to teach you this word because today's service, today's readings, really all of Christianity is about shalom.

Well, what in the world does shalom have to do with our sermon reading from 2 Kings?

At first glance, not much at all, right?

I mean, could you imagine a more heart-breaking story? I don't think I could.

This child that we are introduced to as "growing up" right at the beginning of the story, he was a miracle child to being with, did you know that?

The mother in this story and Elisha went way back. Elisha's full-time job was speaking God's word to God's people all over the country. He was constantly on the road. And this woman and her husband, being a God-fearing and also wealthy couple, invited Elisha to stay at their house, to have a roof over his head and food to eat whenever he

wanted. In fact, they built an addition on to their house that was just for Elisha, a room just for him so that he would always have a place to lay his head.

Elisha wanted to thank them for their over-and-above hospitality. "What can I do for you?"

But, like many other good, God-fearing couples, they answered, "Nothing, we are happy, God has blessed us."

Well, Elisha found out that they didn't have a child – that they had been struggling under that uncomfortable cross of infertility, and we getting kind of old. So Elisha told them, "This time next year, you are going to hold a son in your arms."

The woman's response: "**Don't mislead your servant, O man of God!**... Don't tease me."

But Elisha wasn't teasing her. She did have a child, just like the man of God promised.

But then our story happened... this young miracle boy complains of a headache to his dad who is working out in the field. Dad's busy, so he says, "Go, tell your mother."

And then an absolutely heart-rending sentence: **After the servant had lifted him up and carried him to his mother, the boy sat on her lap until noon, and then he died.**

A mother... holding her son in her lap... watching the life fade from his eyes and his body... helplessly watching her son die...

Like I said, a heart-breaking story... not exactly what I would call shalom...

But then this mother does something curious. Instead of breaking down into an absolute wreck (like I imagine most of you mothers and fathers would), instead of beginning the necessary but heart-breaking funeral preparations (because it isn't going to take long in that climate, in that time for that lifeless body to decay), instead of any of that she takes the boy, places him in Elisha's room, and closes the door. She goes to her husband (and the Bible gives every impression that the husband has no idea that his son is dead), and says, "I want to go see Elisha, the man of God."

"Why," he responds.

Her answer, in Hebrew... "Shalom... all is well. I have peace."

What? Is she in shock? Is that what's going on here? Her mind is refusing to process what has just happened, is that what's happening on here?

Well, let's keep reading:

She gets on a donkey with a servant leading the way and says, "Take me to Elisha (the man of God she calls him, again). Don't you slow down, don't you dare stop unless I tell you."

Elisha sees her coming and sends his servant, Gehazi, to see what is happening. Gehazi runs to this mother and asks her, "Are you ok? Is your husband ok? Is your son ok?"

Her answer, in Hebrew... "Shalom... all is well. I have peace."

Again, what? What's going on here? Is this shock, is she just lying to Elisha's servant?

Well, again, let's keep reading:

She reaches the man of God at Mount Carmel (that same mountain on which Elisha's predecessor, Elijah, had faced off with the prophets of Baal – a mountain synonymous with God's powerful work through his prophets), and the façade of shalom *seems* to fall away. She finally lets out what she'd been keeping inside. She crumbles into a pile of tears on the ground at the man of God's feet...

“Did I ask you for a son? I told you not to get my hopes up! I told you not to tease me! This is even worse than telling me I'm gonna have a son and then not having one! You gave me a son, and then made me watch him die in my arms. **Did I ask for this?”**

On the surface it looks like shalom is gone, right? She was just hiding her lack of shalom by pushing it down deep inside, lying to her husband and Gehazi because she didn't want to let it out.

But is that really what is happening here? Does she have shalom or not?

When you read the story carefully, if you read it often enough, it becomes pretty clear that story the Bible paints for us is not a liar or woman in shock. **The story the Bible paints is that of a woman who knew exactly where to find shalom.** The minute her son died in her arms, she knew exactly where to go to find shalom. She doesn't want anyone or anything to stop her from getting to the one place she knew she could find shalom...

Her pastor... When her son died in her arms she wanted her pastor – not because of who Elisha was, but because of who he worked for - Elisha, who is described exclusively through the first part of this story as **“the man of God.”** She wanted the one man who had told her, taught her, and showed her God – the God of love, the God of shalom.

And this determination to find shalom in God plays out in what happens next. Elisha sends Gehazi to run ahead and see if he could quickly undo whatever was wrong with this child. Mom could have gone rushing back to her child's side with Gehazi, but instead she clings to the man of God: **“As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you.”**

Let me tell you, friends, this is what faith looks like. When the world around her, her earthly circumstances, threatened to rob her of shalom, how does she respond? When her son dies in her arms, how does she respond?

She runs to her God and she clings to her God. Her God was the only one who had given her shalom in the past, and she knew her God would be the only place she could find shalom on a day like this.

On the surface, this broken woman doesn't seem to have anything to do with shalom. But in reality, she knew the only place to find real shalom.

That holds an incredibly important lesson for us.

If your shalom, if your contentment and peace, are founded on your external, earthly circumstances, then shalom is going to be hard to find, and impossible to keep.

I can say that with certainty because I know that the wages of sin is... death.

And these wages, wages that you and I have more than earned, make it impossible to find real and lasting shalom in the things and people of this earth because everything and everyone that we love are all dying. So if your shalom is founded on things

that are dying then shalom is not what you will find. And you know that. You know that from experience. Just like that poor mother in 2 Kings.

I know for a fact that some of you here today know the very anti-shalom feeling of losing a child (whether through the OBGYN saying there's no heartbeat, or watching that smaller than normal casket being lowered into the ground).

I know for a fact that even if you haven't lost a child, all of you have and will know that very anti-shalom feeling the wages of sin brings... you know that death is the ultimate robber of shalom.

And that is why we need to pay close attention to this mother, because even with her dead son in her lap, she knew exactly where shalom could be found; even with the wages of sin threatening to rob her of any semblance of shalom, she knew where to go.

When the wages of sin hit home, the shalom found in a comfy couch after a Thanksgiving feast or on a beach in Florida are shown to be pretty empty and irrelevant sources of shalom. She needed to run headlong to the one source of shalom that had never and would never let her down; the one source of shalom that had never and would never die on her. When her earthly, external circumstances had nothing to do with shalom, she needed her God.

And when she ran to her God, what did she find?

Shalom.

In that crazy ending to this story, Elisha, the man of God, reaches the house, finds the boy lying dead. And in that room, where death threatened to smother any semblance of shalom, where the wages of sin threatened to win the day, by the power of our God, life and shalom won.

Friends, the lesson of 2 Kings 4, the lesson of Romans 8 and Luke 11, the lesson of Christianity is that if we make God the foundation of our shalom, we will never be let down.

We have no other choice. As great as God's gifts of vacation, holidays, family, friends, careers, and health are, the wages of sin prove to us over and over again that those cannot be the foundation of our shalom.

So cling to your God. Cling to your pastors and friends and family members who tell you about your God, teach you about your God, and show you your God. Cling to your Bible – that priceless treasure God has given to you that you can physically cling to when the wages of sin threaten to smother your shalom – read your Bible, study your Bible, memorize your Bible. Cling to the opportunities you have to come together with other believers and experience the presence and love of your God in worship and praise and education.

We have to cling to God as our only reliable source of shalom, because then no matter what happens to us, no matter how much the wages of sin threaten to smother us, in our God, in our Jesus, like that woman, we will find life and shalom forever with him in heaven. Amen.

Now may the Lord of peace (the Lord of Shalom) give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. (2 Thessalonians 3:16)