

BIBLE AND

WELL-BEING
DIGITAL
GUIDE

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*Stories to be told and be lived.
For adventurous spirits.*

*Fr. Flavio Gillio &
Dr. Sally Riconscente*

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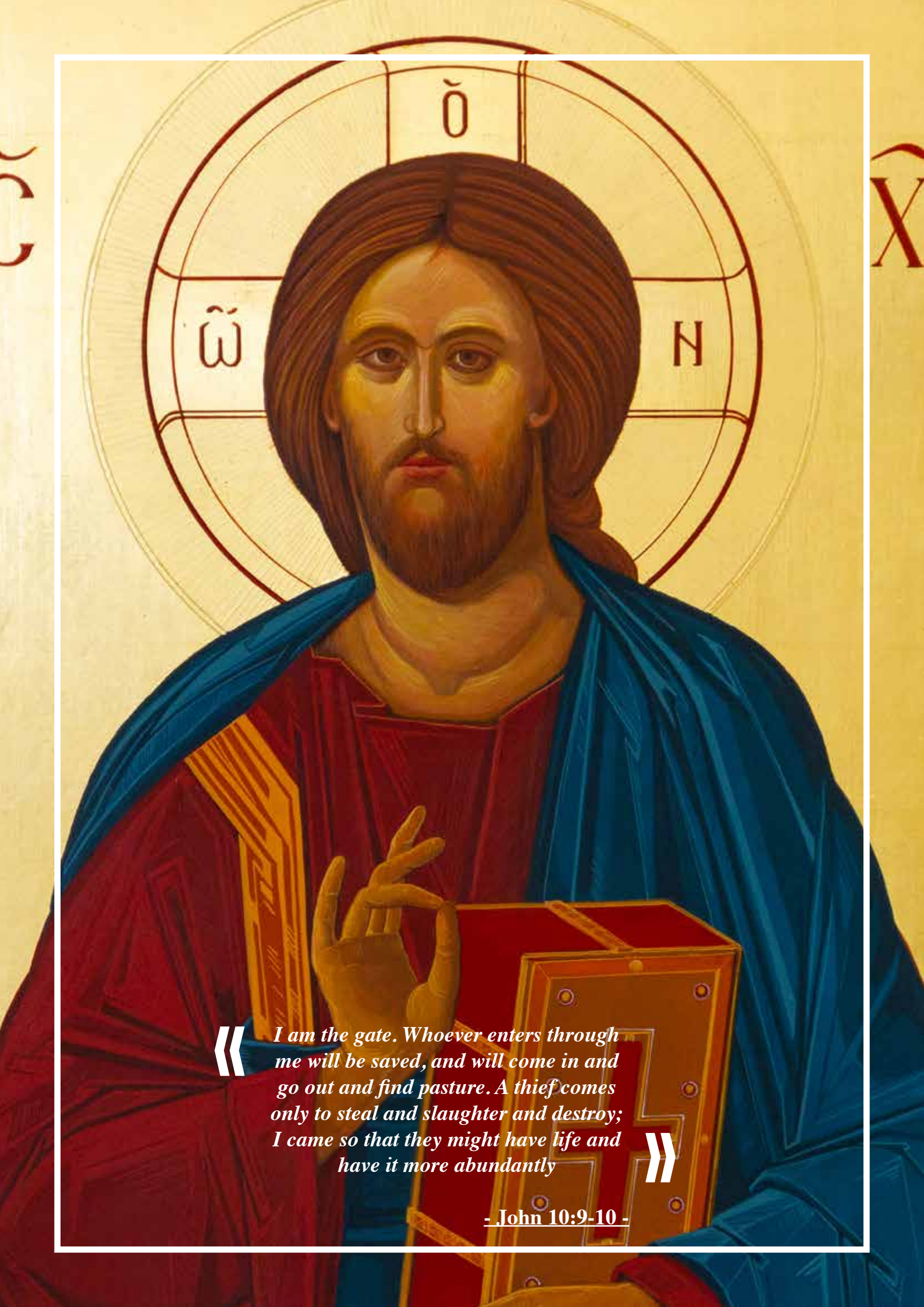
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**HUMAN FLOURISHING, WELL-BEING
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**HUMAN FLOURISHING, WELL-BEING
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«

I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly

»

- John 10:9-10 -

INTRODUCTION

Fr. Flavio Gillio, MS. & Dr. Sally Riconscente



In our ongoing effort to make the La Salette Retreat and Conference Center a space where people of every walk of life, belief, and religious affiliation can integrate a mature spirituality into their own daily lives and experience life in abundance, we have created the new Facebook Group Bible, Spirituality and Well-being. This guide offers an overview of what the Old and New Testament say about Bible and Well-being. The concept of human flourishing and well-being is a pan-anthropological idea, i.e. one of those major concerns that is found in every culture, religious belief, and civilization. In the Western World, since the two great Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle, human flourishing and well-being have been two of the major ideas studied through the centuries. And it is

easy to understand why: we have a natural unquenchable thirst and insatiable hunger for abundant life. Human flourishing and well-being are two powerful motivating forces and goals for everything we hope for, choose, and do, both individually and corporately, regardless of our belief, ethnicity, worldview, culture, or education. So, what does the Bible say about human flourishing and wellbeing? The first thing that stands out is the fact that Scriptures don't encompass in a definition either human flourishing or wellbeing. Rather, they describe them through intentional and specific lexicographic choices, favoring the following key-words: shalom, ashrê, tamîm, baruk, teleios, eirênê, and euloghetos.

HUMAN FLOURISHING, WELL-BEING AND THE BIBLICAL SHALOM



«The LORD will guard you from all evil;
he will guard your soul.
The LORD will guard your coming and going
both now and forever.»

- Psalm 121:7-8 -



«We wonder for distraction,
but we travel for fulfillment.»

- Hilaire Belloc -

The concept of shalom is one of the most prominent ideas of the Old Testament related to human flourishing and well-being. Indeed, 65% of its occurrences are related to one of the two concepts or to both of them, whereas only 25% to a state/relationship without conflict, and only 10% to the standard form of greeting.

The Hebrew shalom is usually translated in English as 'peace.' Such a rendering can fail to capture the semantic value and depth of the Hebrew term. In our everyday language, 'peace' usually connotes a situation that does not register conflict or tension, or an inner state of tranquility and serenity. The problem is that the same term in Hebrew bears a deeper and more involved meaning, conveying the idea of 'completeness' and 'overall well-being.' We emphasize 'overall' because the Bible, when speaking of human flourishing and well-being, does not adopt a dichotomist view that clearly separates the spiritual and material, but rather, it addresses the question of our flourishing and well-being through a holistic approach that includes and values body, mind, and spirit. Scripture doesn't recognize the distinction of spiritual as opposed to material which is still very widespread in the West among Christians.

The semantic richness embedded in the concept of shalom is witnessed by the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint or LXX) that needs two words to translate the Hebrew term into Greek: *teleios* and *eirênê*. The former means 'complete,' 'undivided,' 'whole,' and 'unblemished.' It overlaps with another Hebrew word, *tamîm*, that we will consider later on.

The second Greek term, *eirênê*, like the Hebrew shalom, is generally rendered in English as 'peace.' Like shalom, *eirênê*



means a lot more than simply ‘absence of conflict,’ ‘tranquility,’ or ‘inner serenity.’ In the Greek version of the Old Testament, human flourishing and well-being are not identified with or limited to the absence of conflict, personal happiness, inner serenity, and/or tranquility. Rather, the way both the Hebrew and the Greek Old Testament make use of shalom/eirênê, lets us infer that both human flourishing and well-being sprout forth from God’s saving work. For example, in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, shalom/eirênê are two distinctive key-words that describe Adonai’s redemptive action (see Isaiah 9:5-6; 32:15-20; 48:18; 52:7; 60:1-22). In this light, shalom/eirênê blossoms thanks to the coming of a Son-King (Isaiah 5:6-9) and through the outpouring of the Spirit, whose effects also reverberate over creation (Isaiah 32:15-20; 48:18; 60:1-22). The climax of this dynamic is found in the New Testament, with and through Jesus the Christ.

Jesus the Christ discloses to us the possibility of eternal human flourishing and well-being through His life, death and resurrection. The mystery of the Incarnation bears the unheard good news that in Jesus of Nazareth, God makes Himself totally present; as a consequence, in Jesus of Nazareth, the divine life enters the human realm and takes a human shape. In coherence with this point, the



Catechism of the Catholic Church, quoting St. Athanasius' work, *On Incarnation*, states that "the Word became flesh to make us partakers of the divine nature: 'For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.' For the Son of God became man so that we might be deified. [...] The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods" (see Catechism of the Catholic Church 460)

« The simplification of life is one of the steps to inner peace.
A persistent simplification will create an inner and outer well-being that places harmony in one's life. »

- Pilgrim Peace -

HUMAN FLOURISHING, WELL-BEING AND THE BIBLICAL ASHRÊ

«Jesus answered and said to her: “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”»

- John 4:10 -



The second term that the Old Testament relates to human flourishing and well-being is the Hebrew word *ashrê*. The term appears mostly in the third section of the Old Testament, i.e., the Writings with 26 occurrences in the Book of Psalms and 8 in the Book of Proverbs. Besides that, the other 11 occurrences are scattered among the other sections of the Bible (Pentateuch and Prophets).

Modern English translations of the Hebrew Bible usually render *ashrê* with 'blessed.' Similar to the translation of the Hebrew *shalom* with 'peace,' such a rendering creates a certain confusion, because the Hebrew language knows another word for 'blessed,' i.e. *baruk* or *euloghetos* in Greek. Even though both *ashrê* and *baruk* are rendered in English as 'blessed,' the two words are not synonyms. Indeed, the first one, *ashrê*, emphasizes the state of flourishing and well-being. This is clearly the case of Psalm 1, where the 'ashrê' person is described as "[...] a tree planted beside rivulets of water, which brings forth its fruit in its season, and its leaves do not wilt; and whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1:3). The second term, *baruk*, emphasizes the fact of being the recipient of Adonai's blessings and graces. Such a distinction is further strengthened by the remaining

occurrences of *ashrê* in the Writings. Both the contexts and the ways this term is used let us infer that *ashrê* usually refers to the state of well-being and human flourishing that characterizes those who live wisely by listening to the Torah (see for example, Psalms 1 and 118).

The book of Proverbs maintains the same belief, since both human flourishing and well-being are

The Greek (both in the Septuagint and in the Gospels) renders the Hebrew *ashrê* with *makarios*. An exemplary passage from the New Testament is Matthew 5:3-12, i.e. the Beatitudes. Jesus, here, while instructing and sharing His wisdom with the crowd, illustrates what God-centered human flourishing and well-being look like, in continuity with the previous *ashrê* tradition



By pursuing your any one of our dreams, we can find fulfillment.

We don't need to pursue them all.



- Peter McWilliams -

understood to be the fruits of living wisely, namely listening to the Torah and revering Adonai. Outside the Writings, the term *ashrê* mainly appears in the Prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 30:18; 32:20). Post-biblical and Rabbinic literature continue preserving this way of understanding the term *ashrê*. According to the Rabbis, a life marked by human flourishing and well-being is a life that is shaped, inspired, and guided by Adonai's Torah.

When from the Old Testament we turn to the New Testament, we witness great and clear coherence with the previous *ashrê* tradition.

witnessed by the Psalms, Proverbs, and the Prophet Isaiah. Besides this continuity, the New Testament also bears a novelty: accomplished human flourishing is found in and through Jesus the Christ. Such a statement makes human flourishing and well-being much more than simply an experiential satisfaction or a state of personal happiness. Human flourishing and well-being are less the result of a series of temporary favorable circumstances, and more a lifestyle inspired by Jesus the Christ's life, death and resurrection.

«When we help ourselves we find moments of happiness.

When we help others, we find lasting fulfillment.»

- Simon Sinek -



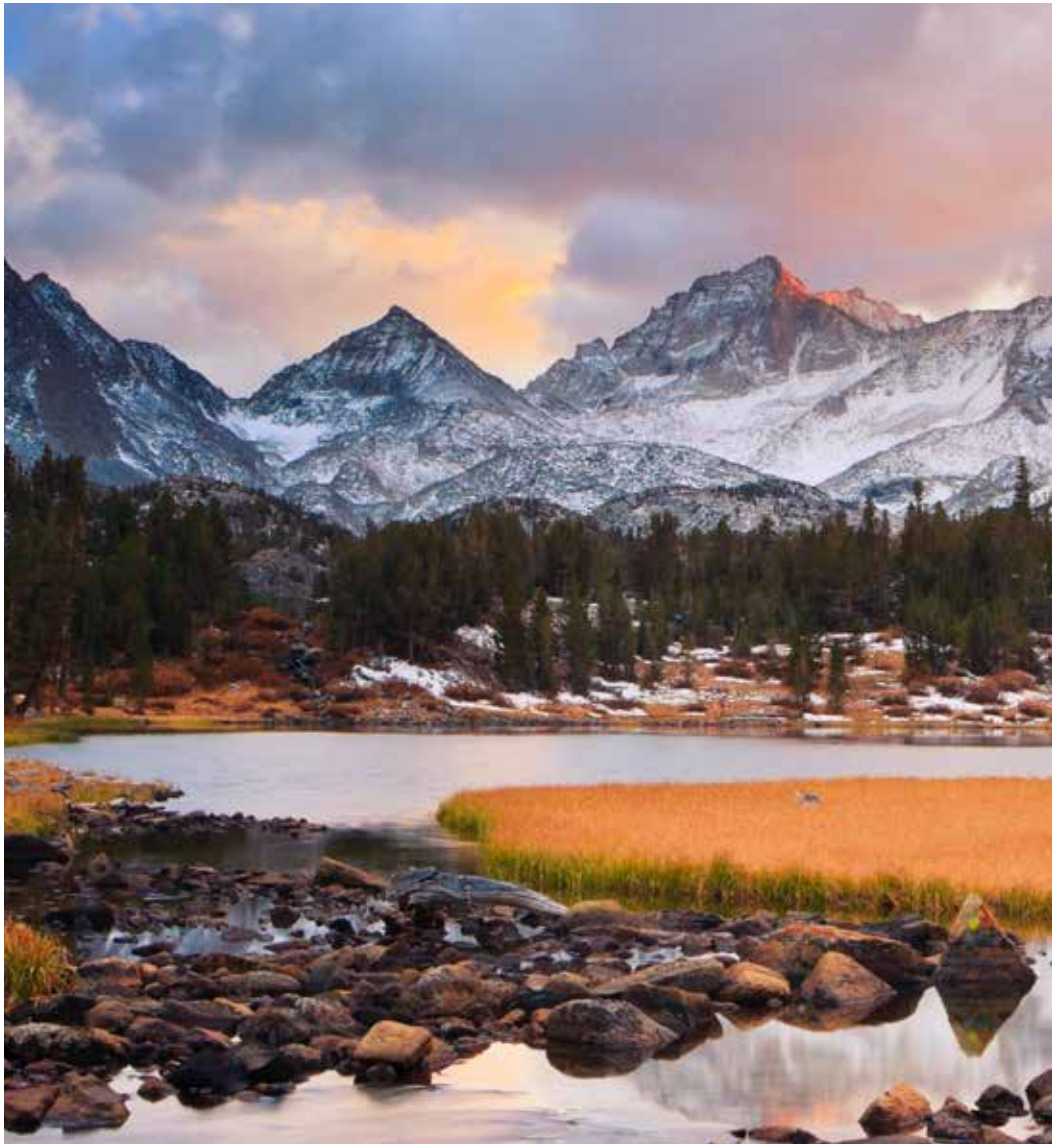
HUMAN FLOURISHING, WELL-BEING AND THE BIBLICAL TAMÎM

Delight yourself in the LORD, and
HE will give you the desires of your
heart.

- Psalm 37:4 -

The Hebrew word *tamîm* is the third relevant term associated with the concept of human flourishing and well-being. Its parallel in Greek is *teleios*. Among its different meanings, the Hebrew word also bears the meaning of 'righteous' and 'perfect' in the sense of 'singleness,' 'integrity of heart' or 'wholeness of heart' (see 1 Kings 9:4).

Very interestingly, the Old Testament often connects *tamîm* with the idea of holiness. Such a connection reverberates over both concepts and enriches their meaning. Whereas we are often inclined to think about holiness in terms of moral purity, the Old Testament, through this connection, regards holiness more as a matter of 'wholeness of heart,' or 'undivided heart,' more specifically, as a matter of 'wholehearted devotedness' to Adonai, or 'undivided commitment to God's work,' as Peter J. Gentry pointed out in his article, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament" (see Peter J. Gentry, "The Meaning of 'Holy' in the Old Testament", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170, 2013). Similarly, another outstanding Old Testament scholar, Mary Douglas, came to the conclusion that holiness means 'to be one,' implying both 'unity' and 'integrity' (see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London (1966) 55). Because of this link between holiness/righteousness/godliness and wholeness/completeness/whole hearted dedication to God, the Old Testament is not uncomfortable in considering characters such as Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and others, as *teleios*, even though they cannot be



« Whoever pursues righteousness
and love finds life, prosperity,
and honor.

- Proverbs 21:22 -



This leads us to say that [God-centered] wholeness is holiness. Such an understanding is found throughout the entire New Testament (see, for example, James 1:4, 17, 25; 2:8, 22; 3:2; Hebrew 2:10; 5:9, 14; 6:1; 7:28; 9:9; 10:1, 14; 12:23; 1 Corinthians 2:6; 14:20; Ephesians 4:13; Philippians 3:12, 15; Colossians 1:28; 4:12). In so doing, both the Old and the New Testament interconnect human flourishing and wellbeing with holiness, and holiness with wholehearted commitment to Adonai. In this way, the Bible avoids the risk of identifying human flourishing and well-being with moral perfection, and, rather, points out that human flourishing and well-being are connected to the idea of 'whole hearted orientation of one's own life to God.'



identified with the embodiment of 'moral perfection,' and even less of 'moral purity!'

Following the understanding of the Old Testament, the New Testament stresses the relevance of the idea of 'wholehearted dedication' and 'commitment' in relation to discipleship. Such a perspective gives new light to a frequently misunderstood passage of the Gospel of

Matthew, and that betrays our pre-conceived understanding of the concept of biblical holiness: the call to be *teleios* found in Matthew 5:48 –an intertextual reworking of Leviticus 19:2 and 20:26, frequently misunderstood as a call to moral perfection–, is actually a call to be wholeheartedly committed and oriented to God by following the Son in the Spirit.



«[...] the joy of the Lord is your strength.»

- Nehemiah 8:10 -

CONCLUSION

«Do not say,
'Why were the old days better than these?'
For it is not wise to ask such questions.»

- Ecclesiastes 7:10 -

The present inquiry started by asking two basic questions: are human flourishing and well-being relevant to the biblical mind? If yes, what does it mean to live well and to flourish from a biblical perspective? The discussion that followed allows us to present a summary and consolidation of the most relevant points.

1. Along with other trends of thought, ancient, modern and contemporary, the Bible is very much interested in human flourishing and well-being. Human flourishing and well-being are indeed two central ideas of the biblical world.

2. What is unique is a) the way the biblical mind portrays both of them and b) the path that it offers to experience both human flourishing and well-being.

3. Despite the variegated lexicography related to human flourishing and well-being, the Hebrew Bible privileges three terms: shalom, ashre, and tamim. Together, these three concepts offer a

holistic view of human flourishing and well-being, without artificially juxtaposing or separating the spiritual and material. Human flourishing and well-being involve our bodies as much as our mind and spirit.

4. For the biblical mind there is no tension or conflict between a godly way of living, on the one hand, and human flourishing and wellbeing, on the other. There cannot be a godly life without a flourishing life in all of the dimensions of our existence. There is



«So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.»

- Isaiah 4:10 -

« It is the Lord who goes before you.
He will be with you; He will not fail
you or forsake you. Do not fear or
be dismayed. »

- Deuteronomy 31:8 -

no such alternative as 'or God or human flourishing and well-being'. The God of the Bible revealed in and through Jesus the Christ doesn't compete against these two concepts. The Bible tells us exactly the opposite: we don't have to choose between God or human flourishing. If human flourishing and well-being are a real possibility for us, it is because of God's work in history. God is not an 'excluding' alternative to our human flourishing and well-being, and He doesn't take anything away from us that is related to abundant life.

5. From the biblical perspective, human flourishing and well-being have to do more with 'living' and 'being' rather than with 'having.' Indeed, both human flourishing and well-being point to a 'way of living' or a 'way of being in the world,' without being of the world (see John 17:14).

6. Biblical wisdom is meant

to encourage and unveil how to experience both human flourishing and well-being. It does so by reminding us of the only three really relevant keys that are able to open the doors of abundant life: our relationship with God, with others, and with creation. It is the quality of these three relationships, taken together, that prevents or fosters human flourishing and well-being. Therefore, human flourishing and well-being imply a lot more than simply absence of conflicts/tensions, inner satisfaction, tranquility, and peace. The biblical mind conceives human flourishing and well-being as fruits of a proper relationship with God, neighbor, and creation. Whereas in the Old Testament this is believed to be possible by listening to and living both the Written and Oral Torah, in the New Testament it is Jesus of Nazareth who is the way to human flourishing and well-being. Torah (oral and written) and Jesus are

the explanation, description and model of what human flourishing and well-being are all about.

7. The God of Israel revealed in and through Jesus of Nazareth is the answer to the radical question of how to flourish and thrive. Jesus' life, death and resurrection represent the climax of God's redemptive work, aimed at restoring each of us to full humanity and well-being, by flourishing in and through Jesus the Christ. In and through him both human flourishing and well-being are fully revealed.

QUESTIONS

«Be strong and courageous;
do not be frightened or dismayed, for
the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.»

- Joshua 1:9 -

Human flourishing and well-being are at the very core of God's redemptive work. And they should also be at the core of the mission of the Church. Whereas we can discuss the various 'hows and means' to fulfill such a mission, it is clear that both human flourishing and well-being should be included in today's mission of every Christian community striving to walk and grow in the footsteps of the Master from Nazareth.

Have you ever thought of the Bible as a source that promotes your well-being?

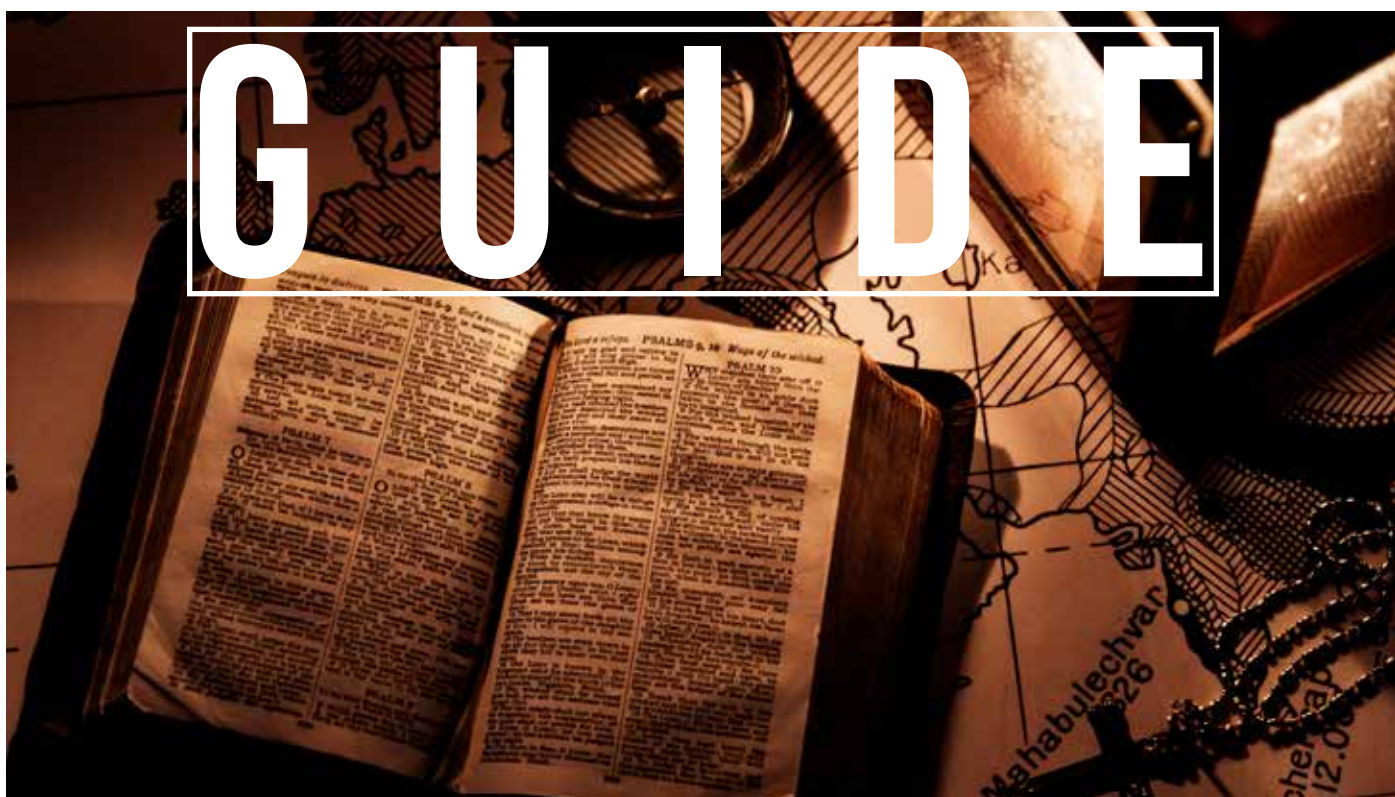
In the pursuit of your well-being, what role do you think the Bible plays?

As you consider your own life and faith journey, what relationship do you see between the person of Jesus of Nazareth and well-being?





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