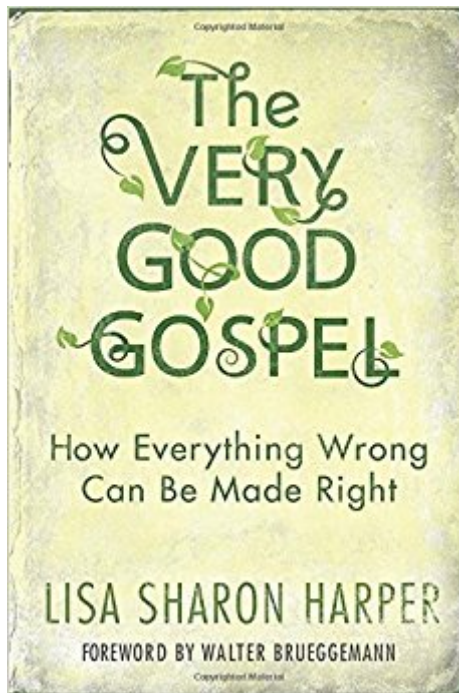




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The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right



Synopsis

God once declared everything in the world “very good.” Can you imagine it? A Vision of Hope for a Broken World. Shalom is what God declared. Shalom is what the Kingdom of God looks like. Shalom is when all people have enough. It’s when families are healed. It’s when churches, schools, and public policies protect human dignity. Shalom is when the image of God is recognized in every single human. Shalom is our calling as followers of Jesus’ gospel. It is the vision God set forth in the Garden and the restoration God desires for every relationship. What can we do to bring shalom to our nations, our communities, and our souls? Through a careful exploration of biblical text, particularly the first three chapters of Genesis, Lisa Sharon Harper shows us what “very good” can look like today, even after the Fall. Because despite our anxious minds, despite division and threats of violence, God’s vision remains: Wholeness for a hurting world. Peace for a fearful soul. Shalom.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for The Very Good Gospel “Lisa Sharon Harper is so smart and interesting •she’s a wonderful leader. I respect her immensely and am passionate about the message of this book.” -Jen Hatmaker, speaker and best-selling author of For the Love “For anyone who has ever wondered if we were meant for more, Lisa Sharon Harper’s The Very Good Gospel provides a resounding “Eyes revealing God’s eternal vision of shalom for all creation •people, families, genders, races, and the nations. Our gospel has long been

presented in a shallow way and unattractive in its narrowness. The Very Good Gospel declares the breadth of God's Word, reconciling social justice and personal salvation, and inviting readers to share the rich message of shalom for all people, as it was intended.

Michael Eric Dyson, political analyst, professor, and best-selling author of *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*

"Lisa Sharon Harper has presented the gospel, the good news, as it was meant to be whole and complete. Our world has compromised so many elements of the good news that we are left with a divided gospel. We need to recover the whole Christian gospel, the wholeness of the church, the wholeness of relationships. Lisa has unleashed the whole-ism of shalom. Her application of the good news for America, for our culture, in the world, reminds us that God is bigger than our problems. My wish is that Christians and non-Christians alike read this book."

Dr. John Perkins, co-founder of the Christian Community Development Association, founder of the John and Vera Mae Perkins Foundation in Jackson, Mississippi, and author of *Let Justice Roll Down*

"For many decades, both mainline Christianity and the evangelical church have been captive to competing, shallow, and unethical understandings of what the good news of the gospel really is. In *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Sharon Harper masterfully presents the case that the very good news God brings to us is about the restoration of shalom—that is to say peace, well-being, wholeness, and abundance—which conquers the false dichotomy between social justice and personal salvation. Lisa shows us that God's creation is emphatically, even forcefully, good, and it is the duty of every human being to responsibly steward God's creation. Lisa's clear, evocative prose blends scholarly theological insights with moving life experiences to show the clear applications of the gospel to our cross-gender relationships, our struggle against racism, how we care for the environment, our relationships with ourselves, and much more. I strongly recommend this book to anyone who seeks to understand God's true purpose for the world and for our lives."

Jim Wallis, New York Times best-selling author of *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, president of Sojourners, and editor-in-chief of Sojourners magazine

"There are lots of egospels out there competing for our affection—the gospel of the Kardashians, of Trump, of American exceptionalism—but Lisa Sharon Harper dives into the one true gospel, God's very good news. On these pages, the Garden of Eden meets the world we live in. Harper stirs up an ancient, radical vision of shalom, whereby God heals all the wounds that sin has created—in our hearts, in our streets, and in our world."

Shane Claiborne, activist and author of *Executing Grace*

"To speak of the gospel

as good news, it has to be good news for the oppressed, the impoverished, the brokenhearted. To embody God's shalom is to embrace and restore the image of God in all humanity no matter who or where they are. Chapter by chapter Lisa Sharon Harper builds the case for reading, understanding, and living the gospel as the life-giving, freedom-bringing, shalom-infused reality it really is. There are new, exciting voices coming from a new, younger generation of evangelicals, and they are turning the traditional meaning of that word around. Lisa Sharon Harper is such a voice and well worth hearing.

• Allan Boesak, South African human-rights activist and the Desmond Tutu Chair of Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation Studies at Christian Theological Seminary and Butler University

“Lisa Sharon Harper writes in a fresh and personal way, combining rich theology with deep experience working with contemporary issues to inspire us not to settle for a thin gospel but a thick gospel—the fullness of the good news of God's reconciliation and shalom that touches all aspects of life. The Very Good Gospel is for all of us struggling with how the good news of Jesus should impact not just our own lives but also speak to the injustices in our world. This book brings all the threads together and weaves a glorious picture of God's redemptive work in creation.

• Ken Wytsma, president of Kilns College and author of Pursuing Justice and Create vs. Copy

“Exposing racism, sexism, and exploitation as a direct assault on God, The Very Good Gospel weaves its wisdom around God's shalom—the blessed web of creation, where the flourishing of one is a flourishing of all. It is beautiful and true. Thank you, Lisa!

• Dr. Mimi Haddad, president of Christians for Biblical Equality, www.cbeinternational.org

“Part mountaineer, part miner, Lisa Sharon Harper has somehow ascended the mountain of Scripture to survey its entirety while also digging deep into its core to extract raw truth of immense implication and conviction. Lisa's revealing stories, scriptural depth, and prophetic voice make The Very Good Gospel a very good read—one you won't want to miss.

• David Drury, chief of staff for the Wesleyan Church World Headquarters and author of nine books including Transforming Presence

“One can scan across the landscape of the church and not find a better articulator of the essence of the gospel in the twenty-first century. Lisa Sharon Harper follows a rich tradition of reformers and iconoclast theological practitioners who deeply love the gospel and God's people. She has made it her life's project to challenge lethargic and cynical people to live love and practice justice. Our world is richer and more vibrant because of her compassionate and strong voice.

• Reverend Dr. Otis Moss III, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ and author of Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World

“In a world that has legitimate reasons to question the possibility of a good God, Lisa Sharon Harper

reminds us what is in fact not only good but beautiful about the God who loves us more than we want to be loved. Her winsome words wash over the reader with gentleness, while simultaneously striking out with a fierce love that is corrective and healing. The Very Good Gospel is more than just a social activist's field guide; it is a road map to a better world—one marked by faith, hope, and love.

—Christopher L. Heuertz, author, activist, and founding partner of Gravity: A Center for Contemplative Activism

Christian social activist and public speaker at Sojourners in Washington, D.C., Lisa Sharon Harper (Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican ... or Democrat) releases a salient, provocative look at scripture through the lens of her own life. From the shalom offered by God to humanity in Genesis, through the "wreckage of the fall," and forward to Jesus' "very good" gospel, Harper mirrors scripture's long arc with contextual family drama, including information about her "third great-grandmother" who was "the last adult slave in [Harper's] family." In an engaging accessible voice, she interweaves the provocative history of 19th-century evangelical movements, 20th-century social gospel and civil rights movements, and the 21st-century Black Lives Matter movement with her own testimony of coming to Christ and her varied experiences as a progressive evangelical. Harper provides detailed history, statistics, and vibrant stories that reveal the possibility of America's redemption. The willing reader will be restored to a "very good" gospel, which sets free those who are broken, economically poor, abused, ashamed, and oppressed. Built on a foundation of solid biblical study, Harper provides a vital, effective contribution to the narrative theology movement. When systematic theologian James W. McClendon coined the phrase "biography as theology," he was advocating for this book: life stories that remake the way we think about God today. (June)

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

Lisa Sharon Harper is the chief church engagement officer at Sojourners, a nonprofit organization committed to putting Christian faith into action in the pursuit of social justice, peace, and environmental stewardship. She is the author of several books, including *Evangelical Does Not Equal Republican...or Democrat* and coauthor of *Forgive Us: Confessions of a Compromised Faith*. Harper has been recognized by *The Huffington Post* as one of "50 Powerful Women Religious Leaders" and is considered one of the nation's most influential voices on a faith-rooted approach to advocacy. Harper speaks extensively, nationally and internationally, and lives in Washington, D.C.

Many Christians, especially in the Evangelical tradition, are quick to identify with the gospel (i.e.,

good news) of Jesus. But why exactly is it good news that God's kingdom is coming on earth as it is in heaven? This is the question that Lisa Sharon Harper sets out to answer in her superb new book *THE VERY GOOD GOSPEL*. Focusing on the scriptural concept of shalom, a Hebrew word that is often translated as "peace," but is much broader than our typical understanding of peace, Harper explores the fullness of the shalom that God intends for creation and why it is indeed good news. The very good news is that God desires us to have shalom with God, shalom with ourselves, shalom between the genders, shalom with all creation, shalom for broken families, shalom in the midst of racial injustice, shalom between nations, and more. This is a very accessible book (and it includes reflection exercises to help readers engage with it), and it provides one of the richest depictions of the flourishing life God intends for creation. Lisa Sharon Harper will undoubtedly stir our imaginations with her case for why the gospel is extraordinary news!

From the moment I saw the author worked at Sojourners, I knew this would be a book that I wouldn't agree 100% with. Why? Sojourners is famous for being a left-leaning evangelical organization and I'm a right-leaning evangelical. The clash was inevitable. But since I'm also the kind of person that appreciates having my views challenged, I was up for hearing Ms. Harper out as she tried to show that the gospel means more than heaven-when-you-die. The results were mixed. Harper opens the first chapter of this book with a history of evangelicalism over the past 150 or so years. She discusses how activism (especially over the issue of slavery) characterized much of the Second Great Awakening but eventually disappeared because of more liberal scholars and pastors who reduced Christianity down to a mere political, social-gospel. More conservative Christians became so wary of the social-gospel that they eventually lost the social component completely rather than retreating to the middle and acknowledging that there is both a future and present element in the Kingdom of God. She ends this chapter with a great quote by Walter Brueggemann which sums up her understanding of the gospel: "The vision of wholeness, which is the supreme will of the biblical God, is the outgrowth of a covenant of shalom (see Ezekiel 34:25), in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community with none to make them afraid" (page 15). Harper believes that a fuller understanding of the gospel is one that sees 'shalom' restored to humankind's relationships - with other humans, with creation, and with God. In this book she lays out how shalom should be restored in these areas and encourages her readers to begin the process of living out the Gospel. There is a lot in this book that I really appreciate. I agree, with Harper, that the Christianity's gospel is, too often, thin. It can be so focused on the after-life that it

forgets the current one. As a result, it has lost much of the power that originally propelled it into its first few centuries of existence. I, too, would love to see an Evangelicalism that views the Gospel as powerful today - powerful to save from sin, to restore broken relationships, to create loving communities. Harper does a good job of showing how broken this world is and how the Gospel has the power to change everything. Unfortunately for me, she also lets her left-leaning bias stretch the Gospel (and certain passages of scripture) in unnecessary ways. How about an example? In her chapter on how shalom can be restored with God, she discusses the famous story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4 if you need a refresher). Here's what she says about this woman: "The back story provided in John 4:16-18 explains that the woman had had five husbands and the man she was with at the time was not her husband. She had given herself to five men and five men and [sic] thrown her out. How empty must she have felt? How used? How disappointed? How unworthy of love? Five times the woman trusted a man to care and provide for her in a world where men had multiple wives and concubines but women could have only one husband. Five times she had a home, food, and protection; five times she was thrown away." Say what?! I'm sorry but that simply isn't what the text says. After Jesus tells this woman about the 'living water' that he has access to, she asks for some. Jesus responds with a command, "Go, call your husband and come here" (John 4:16). Why does Jesus tell her to do this? Is it because he wants to dredge up old memories of how used she has been? Is it because he's wanting to let her know that he'll be the husband she never had? Or is it because he wants her to confront her sin? I would argue that it's the latter. When Jesus encounters people, he usually confronts people with their sin (or need) once they express a desire to have a part in what he's doing. Jesus tells her to get her husband because she has been living sinfully, not because she's been used five times. This is one of the problems with that Left-bias that Harper holds, according to the Left, there are oppressors and the oppressed. Men are oppressors. Women are oppressed. (Note: I'm not saying that Harper believes this, would say this, or her book advocates for this. I am saying that it's a deeply ingrained sentiment within many in the Left so it comes out when they write and speak, even if ever so slightly. I'm also not denying that, historically, men have often oppressed women). As a result of this prejudice, in Harper's mind (yes, I'm speculating here), this woman had to be oppressed - merely someone who was used by five different men. I'm not saying that this Samaritan woman was a seductress who went out of her way to con five different men to sleeping with or marrying her - I don't believe the text gives us enough to paint a very vivid picture of her life. But I do believe the text and context strongly imply that she was not totally in the right here - her actions had been, at least in part, sinful. The world is not as neat as we might like. All humanity is sinful - even those who are part

of traditionally oppressed groups. Sin isn't a characteristic of only those with authority. We have all contributed to the world's problems through sin. We're all responsible. Harper's bias crops up like this here and there throughout this book. And yet, we all have biases. None of us approach anything completely objectively. However, when we come to the scripture, it is imperative that we do our best to take as objective a position as possible. We should examine our biases and be willing to acknowledge when reality does not reinforce them. I've written and preached from a position more colored by my bias than by reality. We all do from time to time. But it's something we need to be aware of - especially when we approach the preaching or writing of those who come with different biases. My hope is that conservative evangelicals will read more books like 'The Very Good Gospel' and allow it to challenge them and their biases. If the things we believe are true and rooted in the Word, they won't be uprooted by a little contrary wind. In fact, that wind may strengthen them or even reveal areas where we need to grow in understanding and in practice. May we all seek to not only learn but also to live this very good Gospel.

Summary. Through a study of the early chapters of Genesis with application to contemporary life, Harper explores the theme of shalom and how this enlarges our understanding of the good news. Have you ever felt that there must be more to the gospel? This is a question that Lisa Sharon Harper has struggled with in her own life and for which she found profound answers as she explored the biblical theme of shalom as well as the early the early chapters of Genesis, that begin with a vision of shalom, explore how shalom was broken, and the effects of that brokenness on our relationships with God, ourselves, between genders, in the creation, in families, around issues of race, and relations between nations. In each chapter, Harper explores the Genesis text, develops the idea of shalom, and through this weaves in other biblical material from both testaments. In the process, she weaves in her own life as a black woman, from a flawed family, experiencing issues with her own self-image, with relationships, and in the journey to pursue racial reconciliation and justice. As she does so, she develops a vision of the gospel that is so much larger than just me and my sin and Jesus rescuing me from hell so I can spend eternity with Him. It is a gospel that explains both God's incredibly wonderful intention for the world, and how our choice to love something more than God and believe a lie damaged the fabric of relationships, broke shalom. From the sacrifice of an animal in Genesis 3 to the sacrifice of Christ, she explores how God has restored shalom, which is indeed very good news. The final chapter was the most moving. She talks about death, and her own struggle with dealing with death, including her silence when a close friend lost her father. And she movingly describes the breakthrough she experienced when Richard Twiss, a Lakota Indian

ministry leader was dying and she had a vision of anointing his feet with oil, confirmed by a friend who had a similar vision. "On the way to the hospital, I read the story of Lazarus and the grave (see John 11:1-44) and felt called to read it over Richard. When I arrived, I learned during the day, Richard's kidneys had failed. I shared the two visions--mine and my friend's--with Katherine, Richard's wife and cofounder of Wiconi. She gave me permission to read the passage over Richard and to anoint his feet. As I read, we all wept. I never noticed this before, but the passage begins with an explanation that Lazarus was the brother of Mary, the woman who anointed Jesus feet for burial. I anointed Richard's feet and prayed... "I can't help but think back to the moment when I anointed Richard's feet. It is clear now. We were anointing our brother's feet for burial. As I moved the oil over his feet, I repeated the words that Richard's editor had said to me when we talked earlier that night: "Beautiful are the feet of the one who brings good news." I think there are many like Lisa who have feared death, who never have been alongside someone as they were dying in the hope of Christ, the hope of Jesus' resurrection, whose body with anointed feet was laid in a grave, only to walk out on those feet when the stone was rolled away. Lisa described this moment as "devastating and sweet." She describes how we both grieve and yet hope because of this very good news. This is a book for the believing person who is wondering, "is that all there is?" when they think of the gospel, particularly if they wonder about the relevance of the gospel to the brokenness they see around them. This is a book for new believers to help them understand the fullness of what they have believed. And it is a book that the person considering faith might also read, both because of its exposition of this "very good gospel" and for the honest yet winsome account Harper gives of her own growing understanding of that gospel.

Disclosure of Material Connection: I received this book free from the publisher via Blogging for Books . I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own.

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