

1 Peter—Shepherding the Flock—1 Peter 5:1-5
College Baptist Church
May 9, 2021

I invite you to turn with me to 1 Peter, chapter 5. 1 Peter can be found toward the end of the New Testament, just after the book of James. If you didn't bring a Bible, there are Bibles in the pew racks; I believe you will find 1 Peter 5 on p. 1016. Today's sermon text is also printed in the bulletin along with space for taking notes.

Since we have a good number of visitors here today, I wanted you to know that we have been studying the book of 1 Peter this winter and spring at College Baptist. And one of the major themes of this letter, written by the Apostle Peter to Christians living in the first-century, is the theme of suffering with hope.

Christians were a minority in the Roman Empire, which was hostile to Christianity. So, Peter offers a lot of practical advice about how to endure and even embrace suffering for Christ without losing hope. In last week's passage, Peter was so bold to proclaim that those who suffer for Christ are blessed!—blessed with the privilege of sharing Christ's suffering, blessed by the sustaining power of the Spirit, and blessed to be saved with difficulty—awaiting glory that comes to all who entrust themselves to God.

The study of the letter has been timely for us as Americans living in the 21st century—a time when persecution against Christians and biblical ideals seems to be on an exponential rise. For most of us, suffering has seemed far off and far away, but in recent years suffering for Jesus seems to have drawn near. So, we need these biblical truths as a source of hope in our day of suffering...and for our children in the days ahead.

Now the majority of Peter's letter has been directed toward Christians in general, "*elect exiles*" living under difficult circumstances as they await their eternal "*inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading*." But in chapter 5, Peter directs his words to a particular subset within the church—the Elders. And Peter isn't talking about the Elders in terms of the elderly—like the grandmas and grandpas in the bunch. He is talking about those holding the office of Elder—that is, the men who have been called by God and appointed by the congregation to a role of servant leadership. The Bible uses a variety of terms to describe this singular office: Overseers or Bishops in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 (which offer a list of qualifications), Pastors or Shepherds in Ephesians 4, and Elders, here in 1 Peter 5. All of these terms refer to the same office. With this in mind, let's listen to Peter's exhortation to the Elders called to lead God's suffering people.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

In our time this morning, I would like us to focus on the mission, the methods, the model, and the motivation of the Elders according to Peter's exhortation. And I want us to remember that though this exhortation was written directly to Elders in the first-century, it still has great benefit for all of us living in the 21st Century. It has benefit for Elders of churches today—because these truths are universal. So, Jared, Don, Leonard, listen up as I preach this passage to myself and to you! It has benefit for congregations—so they know what to expect from their current Elders and so that they know the qualities to look for in future Elders. So, let's see the mission, methods, model, and motivation of Elders.

The Mission

The mission of the Elders is captured well in the primary command in verse 2, "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*" To call the Elders to *shepherd* might sound odd to our contemporary ears, but in the ancient world, shepherding was commonplace. Everyone knew and understood the role of a shepherd in the ancient world. A shepherd was responsible to protect and provide for his flock. To protect his sheep from dangerous wolves and thieves; and to lead his flock to places of provision—clean water and green pastures. And those are the primary responsibilities of Elders in the church—to protect and provide. Elders are called to protect from false teaching and heresy—which abound as much today as ever! And Elders are called to provide the church with the spiritual sustenance of God's Word. The Elders' mission is to shepherd by providing & protecting.

But I want us to notice two important details about this mission of shepherding. First, notice that Elders are called to "*shepherd the flock of God.*" In other words, Elders are stewards, not owners. Elders are not tasked so much to care for their *own* people as they are charged to care for *God's* people. What a responsibility to care for God's people?! To shepherd on behalf of the LORD, who is the shepherd of the 23rd Psalm.

Second, notice that Elders are called to "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you.*" So, Elders are not called to shepherd the whole flock of God—ALL Christians everywhere. They are called to shepherd the flock *among* them—that is, their own local congregation.

May I say, this little word, "*among*" is a reminder of the biblical importance of church membership. Though membership isn't explicitly stated here—I believe it is implied. There seems to have been some mechanism by which Elders knew the sheep "among them"—the ones for whom they were responsible. Church membership is a mechanism by which sheep say, "I belong to the flock of God by faith in Jesus; and I voluntarily desire to be shepherded by these Elders in this particular flock." Membership is the unmistakable way for sheep to make themselves accountable. And membership is a great help to Elders in that regard—it gives clarity to the size and scope of their flock and it grants them the permission to care for the sheep freely without feeling like they are meddling intrusively. So, if you haven't considered church membership, I would urge you to do so. College grads, prayerfully commit to finding a church home soon after you relocate—that you might find yourself among fellow sheep and that you might receive the oversight of Elders among you. Intentionally belonging—as opposed to attending—is not only for the benefit of the Elders, but for the benefit of the sheep as well.

And may I also say, that this little word “*among*” is a huge relief to us as an Elder board a College Baptist! This little word reminds us that we are not responsible for the spiritual well-being of every Christian in Hillsdale County, not to mention the entire state, country, or world. We are responsible for the flock *among us*. This truth has been so helpful and freeing this past year—as we navigated ministry during COVID. It allowed us to be primarily concerned with College Baptist—not what churches were doing in Los Angeles or Lansing, but what was best for the flock of God entrusted to us. And while I’m sure we didn’t do things perfectly, I know we did our prayerful best to live up to the mission of “*shepherd[ing] the flock of God that is among [us]*.”

The Methods

But Peter knows that Elders are prone to falter and fail as they exercise oversight. Certainly, the Elders of Israel had faltered and failed in their shepherdly oversight—sometimes miserably. Listen to the words of Ezekiel 34:1-4, describing the complete and utter failure of the prophets, priests, and kings—those Elders of the Old Covenant, *The word of the Lord came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.*

Those shepherds were selfish, inconsiderate, ungracious, and negligent. They ruled with force and harshness—like an owner who kicks his dog or a farmer who beats his livestock. Obviously, that is no way to shepherd and oversee a flock of people—especially people, who in Peter’s day were experiencing the harshness and force of the Roman Empire. They needed shepherds whose methods were caring and gentle. So, Peter offers three pairs of contrasts in verses 2-3 to describe the appropriate methods of an Elder’s oversight.

First, Elders should watch over the church willing, not under compulsion. That is to say that Elders should have a healthy desire to serve. Think of the difference between a soldier who serves as the result of being drafted versus the soldier who serves by enlisting voluntarily. Healthy desire to serve goes a long way. As Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:1, Elders should possess a healthy aspiration, a desire for this noble task. This means that shepherding is not something that any man should be forced to do just because he is thought of highly in his vocation or because he was born into a family of church leaders. An Elder must shepherd willingly—according to his God-given desire.

Second, Elders should exercise oversight eagerly, not for shameful gain. The shameful gain that is most alluring to Elders—especially vocational Elders like myself typically comes in the form of money. The allure of eldering for monetary gain is as old as the New Testament. In Corinth, there were false teachers who peddled the word of God for personal profit (2 Cor. 2:17). And Paul warned young Timothy about the love of money and urged him to cultivate a spirit of contentment instead (1 Tim 5:6-10).

Now, it is true according to 1 Corinthians 9 that one who sows spiritual seed is due a material harvest, and 1 Timothy 5 teaches that Elders who serve as preachers and teachers deserve their wages—which is to say that pastoring is not a vow of poverty. But pastoring must be more than a paycheck. And while I am grateful for the ways that College Baptist provides for the material needs of me and my family, I must never pastor primarily to shamefully pad my personal pockets.

Third, Elders should exercise oversight as examples, not as domineering tyrants. While the serious responsibility of shepherding God’s people does come with authority, the authority of an Elder is not his own. Edmund Clowney wisely states in his book, “*Called to the Ministry*,” that “*the authority of the steward in Christ’s house is completely tied to the Word he preaches.*” Elders have no authority of their own to wield—we only have the authority of God’s Word. So, we must exemplify a humility and subservience to God and his Word that all the rest of the flock can see and imitate. An Elder is first a sheep in God’s fold, before he is a shepherd of God’s flock.

The Model

And when Elders struggle with living out these methods of oversight, they have a model—Jesus, who is called the chief shepherd in verse 4. Think about the ways that Jesus was a shepherd to his people during his earthly ministry.

- He welcomed little children.
- He prayed constantly.
- He protected the vulnerable from the greedy and self-righteous.
- He taught with patience all who would listen.
- He showed concern for the distressed and poverty-stricken.
- He brought words of grace and mercy and forgiveness to repentant sinners.

The chief shepherd didn’t hesitate to get in the muck and mire of the sheepfold. As Philippians 2 puts it, he didn’t consider his equality with God something to be held onto tightly. He humbled himself that he might know and be known by his sheep.

Jesus is the model for Elders. And in turn, Elders should give their people a glimpse of Jesus. In an excellent book called the “Art of Pastoring,” David Hansen describes Jesus as a parable of God and the pastor [or Elder] as a parable of Jesus. He says, “*isn’t it possible that pastors [or Elders], to the extent that they follow Jesus, are parables of Jesus Christ and so deliver [Jesus] to those they encounter?*”

In other words, when an Elder imitates the chief shepherd, the congregation sees a bit of Jesus for themselves. When Elders are faithful under-shepherds, the people can better understand the chief shepherd. Now, I am incredibly blessed to serve with Elders who model their lives after Jesus. They aren’t perfect men, but I see Jesus in them.

In Don, I see the hospitality and wise teaching of Jesus.

In Jared, I see the warmth and selflessness of Jesus.

In Leonard, I see the tenderness and patience of Jesus.

And I trust you see these things too. So, make sure to thank these men. And please pray for us as Elders—that we might continue to grow in following Jesus so that we will be faithful under-shepherds, who give you a glimpse of the chief shepherd himself.

And above all, may we give you a glimpse of the sacrifice of the chief shepherd, who laid his life down for the sheep. As the meditation from William Chantry stated this morning, *“Our Good Shepherd has become the model for under-shepherds. His great concern is the good of the sheep. A good shepherd gives himself to the sheep. A thief comes to get something from the flock – wool or mutton. Jesus our Lord made every personal claim subservient to the blessing of his flock; even to giving His life that they might live.”*

And while the prayers and words of gratitude of a congregation are a great encouragement to its Elders, the prayers and thankfulness are not the ultimate motivation for shepherding the flock of God.

The Motivation

No, there is a greater motivation. As Peter says in verse 4, *“when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”* That crown of unfading glory is the motivation of the Elders. As you probably know, athletes in the ancient world raced for a laurel crown. The leafy green crown symbolized the glory of victory—triumph on the track. But those laurel crowns didn’t last—the leaves withered and eventually their bodies withered too. Their victories were forgotten; their records were eclipsed; their glory faded.

But here, Peter promises a crown of UNfading glory. It’s Mother’s Day—maybe you will plant some flowers for your mom or grandma on this special day—hearty flowers that won’t fade through the summer months? Well like petunias that bloom all summer long, the crown of glory promised to faithful elders is eternally blooming. It never wilts or fades—it is a crown of perpetual glory. And this is the reward for Christ-like under-shepherds—a crown of glory from the Chief Shepherd that shines for eternity.

In a world of suffering and in flocks with both faithful sheep *and* wayward lambs, Peter encourages elders to keep their eyes on eternity. He doesn’t offer promises of material success and personal prestige; he offers something better—a crown of unfading glory from the chief shepherd himself. May this be the motivation of Elders today.

In recent years we have seen many church leaders fall tragically—some have fallen into ministry-disqualifying sin, some have fallen into apostasy—renouncing their own faith in Jesus, and many have fallen into dereliction of duty—failing to shepherd the flock.

In the wake of these fallen church leaders, may ordinary men step up to the mission of *“shepherd[ing] the flock of God among [them].”* May their methods be willing, eager, and exemplary. May they keep their eyes of the model—Jesus, the chief shepherd. And may they be motivated by the eternal reward of unfading glory received from the Lord himself. And in so doing, may God be honored as *his* flock receives the protection and provision they so desperately need.

Benediction—1 Peter 5:10-11

[May] the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ,
...restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and
ever. Amen.