

A SHEPHERDED PEOPLE (1)
1 Peter 5:1-2a
March 29, 2009 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

A few weeks ago we looked at the closing verses of chapter 4, touching only briefly on verses 17-19. I noted then that we would come back to those verses before delving into chapter 5 and that is what I would like to do by way of introduction this morning.

John Piper draws attention to the fact that Peter's exhortation to the elders in chapter 5 might seem out of place or a sudden interjection. "If we ask, 'Why did Peter feel the need to exhort the elders here at the end of his letter?' we get a clue to the answer in the word 'therefore.'" You have heard me address the importance of the word "therefore" in biblical interpretation. It serves to denote a logical thought connection to be drawn from what preceded. We see the word in both 4:19 at the end of chapter 4 and again in v. 1 of chapter 5. What Peter does here is draw two conclusions as it relates to the fiery ordeal, the fires of testing, that Peter suggests should not surprise, shame, or discourage those who participate in the sufferings of Christ (see sermon on 1 Pet. 4:12-19). One purpose is for the church as a whole, the household of God (4:17-19), the other is for the leaders in the church (5:1-4). Piper puts it this way:

Peter has been warning the church about the "fiery ordeal that is coming upon them for their testing" (4:12). He says (in 4:13) that the Christians may share the sufferings of Christ for a season and then exult in the glory of Christ when he comes. This is what Peter says about himself in 5:1 when he calls himself a fellow elder with the elders he's writing to. He says he is a witness to Christ's sufferings and a sharer in the coming glory. This alerts us that this "fiery ordeal" (4:12) probably has something to do with the elders in chapter 5.

This gets even clearer in 4:17. Peter explains why this "fiery trial" is coming on the church. He says (v. 17), "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (18) And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?"

These verses have to do with the whole church. The fiery ordeal that comes as punishing condemnation on unbelievers hits the church first as fires of purification and refining (cf. 1:7).¹

Piper suggests, and I agree, that Peter's purpose in 4:17-19 is to show that the same fires that bring God's wrathful judgment on the unbeliever are the same fires He uses to purify the church and that the elders are the "first responders," if you will, in the fire. In other words, the "fiery ordeal" of 4:12 that is a judgment from God which begins with the church begins with the leaders first. We see this prophetically illustrated in Ezekiel 9:4-6, a passage that seems to have served Peter's thought here as he wrote according to the Spirit of God:

Ezekiel 9:4-6 – The LORD said to him, "Go through the midst of the city, *even* through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst" (There's the fiery

¹ http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByScripture/4/872_Who_Shall_Shepherd_the_Flock/, accessed 03/26/2009.

ordeal).⁵ But to the others He said in my hearing, “Go through the city after him and strike; do not let your eye have pity and do not spare.”⁶ Utterly slay old men, young men, maidens, little children, and women, but do not touch any man on whom is the mark; *and you shall start from My sanctuary*” (There’s the judgment that begins with the household of God). *So they started with the elders who were before the temple.*

What Peter sets forth in our text is that it is important that the body of Christ be led through the fire. The elders have an enormous responsibility at all times, especially in times of testing. Piper puts it this way, “It is a fearful and wonderful thing to be an elder in the house of God. If the elders lead the church into strength and glory, they will also lead the church into the refiner’s fire of God’s purifying judgment. They will not stand above the church or outside the church giving suggestions for how to cope with fire; they will lead the church into the fire.”² So Peter here directly addresses the importance of godly shepherds to shepherd His church.

I. Peter’s Connection with the Elders (5:1)

Peter addresses **“the elders among you.”** Time does not allow for us to delve into all that the Scriptures teach in relation to the office of elder. I would refer you to Phil Newton’s book, *Elders in Congregational Life*, and another that our own elder Steve Cowan edited, *Who Runs the Church?* for deeper study. Here, I do want to point out that Peter speaks to the leaders of the churches, who he calls elders, scattered throughout Asia Minor. We know the practice of appointing a plurality of leaders in each local church was the practice from Acts 14:23. To these leaders Peter exhorts, **“Shepherd the flock of among you.”**

However, before we look at what this shepherding entails, it is important for us to see how Peter strives to identify with these men. Instead of appealing to them as an Apostle as he did in opening the letter, designating his authority, he places himself on their level as their **“fellow elder.”** He does not approach them as their superior, which he was, but as one who knew by experience what it meant to participate in **“the sufferings of Christ”** that one might receive **“the glory to be revealed.”** This is the essence of Peter’s letter – suffering is the pathway to glory. No less than six times in the letter Peter stresses this truth (1:7, 11, 21; 4:13-14; 5:4, 10).

And who better to address these elders with this exhortation than Peter? He had been **“a witness of the sufferings of Christ.”** He was an eyewitness to the ministry of Christ and saw how the opposition mounted against Him. He was present in the Garden when Jesus cried out to the Father. He was there when without any warrant they arrested Jesus and dragged him before the courts. You remember it was there, at the gates of that courtyard, that Peter denied Christ three times. So what makes Peter so fit to now talk about shepherding the flock? Remember the dialogue that Jesus had with Peter after His resurrection, a dialogue that no doubt reflected back to Peter’s denials?

John 21:15-17 – ¹⁵ So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My lambs.” ¹⁶ He said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.” ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him

² See Piper link, footnote 1.

the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.”

Most of us remember that part of the dialogue. But do you recall what follows. Jesus tells Peter of the sufferings he would encounter for His sake, for following Him, “‘Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to gird yourself and walk wherever you wished; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will gird you, and bring you where you do not wish to go.’ Now this He said, signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God.” Peter was commissioned to shepherd the sheep. And even though it meant severe persecution and a gruesome death, Jesus said to Peter, “Follow Me” (Jn. 21:18-19). This is the Peter who now writes to exhort these elders to follow Christ and lead by example, enduring suffering in the present so that they will receive their reward in the future, **“the glory that is to be revealed.”**

II. Peter’s Exhortation to the Elders (5:2a; Ez. 34)

In all that Peter sets forth concerning the ministry of these men, there is only one exhortation given, **“Shepherd the flock of God among you.”** As we will see next week, Peter expands on this imperative in what follows, but those things only serve to clarify and underscore what Peter means in this call to **“shepherd the flock of God.”** Here is a reminder to these elders, and to your elders, that the **“flock”** is God’s flock, the church is God’s church. This is important when we consider the negative contrasts that Peter gives concerning the elders’ practice. Here, he simply gives one participial phrase to positively describe the shepherd’s task, **“exercising oversight.”** Tom Schreiner, suggesting the likelihood that the offices of elder and overseer are the same in the New Testament, states, “As God’s shepherds and leaders, they are to oversee the church and superintend it.”³ And, as Alexander Strauch points out, “It should be observed that Paul and Peter assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders.” So with this exhortation we see that the flock of God needs to be shepherded. What, then, does this shepherding entail?⁴

1. Leading (Experience)

This is Peter’s primary idea in the phrase **“exercising oversight.”** As chosen and called by God, the elders are to provide pastoral oversight to the local church in leading and managing the flock. I like what Strauch says concerning leading:

A healthy, growing flock of sheep doesn’t just appear; it is the result of the shepherd’s skillful management of sheep and resources. He knows sheep and is skillful in caring for them. A good shepherd elder knows people. He knows how sensitive they are. He knows their needs, troubles, weaknesses, and sins. He knows how they can hurt one another. He knows how stubborn they can be. He knows how to deal with people. He knows that they must be slowly and patiently led. He knows when to be tough and when to be gentle. He knows peoples’ needs and what must be done to meet those needs. He knows how to accurately assess the health and direction of the congregation. And when he doesn’t know these things, he is quick to find answers.⁵

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, *NAC: 1,2 Peter, Jude*, 233-234.

⁴ I am indebted to Alexander Strauch’s excellent treatment of the shepherd in *Biblical Eldership*, 16-30.

⁵ Strauch, 26.

This is exactly why we see so much in the qualifications of elders given towards leadership. He must be able to manage his own household well in order to manage the flock of God (1 Tim. 3:4, 5). They will “rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17) and be above reproach as God’s steward or manager (Titus 1:7). This leadership takes hard work. Paul encourages those at Thessalonica to “appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction” (1 Thess. 5:12). Hard work was important to Paul. As we will see next week, there is no place for laziness in shepherding. Paul wrote to Timothy, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who *work hard* at preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17)

2. Feeding (Ez. 34) (Knowledge)

One of the characteristics of sheep is that they are nearly incapable of feeding and watering themselves properly. They have to be given food and water or they will never eat or drink. They must also be given the proper amounts at the proper time or they will eat too much or eat all the time. Without a shepherd, the sheep would quickly waste away or gorge away. Ezekiel 34 is one of the places where the shepherd’s role is set forth in a negative way. One of the evidences leveled against the bad shepherds was their failure to feed the flock.

Of course, the elder’s main concern, even in Baptist circles where we love to eat, is on spiritual food, not physical food. That is the purpose of these illustrations in Scripture. Emphasis is placed on the centrality of teaching and preaching God’s Word. When Jesus told Peter to feed His sheep (Jn. 21:17), He was not referring to physical food, though He cares for that as well. But first and foremost the Apostles were teachers, and early Christians devoted themselves to their teaching (Acts 2:42). The elders calling is to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), properly feeding the flock with the food they need when they need it. Paul commanded Timothy, “Preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4:2). Why? Because the time would come when the sheep will manifest their sheepness. Remember, the sheep are incapable of feeding themselves properly. If the shepherd is not faithful in feeding them the pure milk of God’s Word, they starve. Of course, there are those who demonstrate they are not sheep at all by spurning the food the shepherd gives, “not enduring sound doctrine” (2 Tim. 4:3), and they go and find a shepherd that will feed them what they want when they want it, to their own demise. The Shepherd is charged to feed the flock, to “preach the Word.”

3. Protecting (Acts 20:28-32) (Watchful)

Another of the works of an elder is to protect the local body from false teachers. As Paul was leaving Asia Minor, he exhorted the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28-31a:

Acts 20:28-31a – ²⁸ *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.* ²⁹ *I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;* ³⁰ *and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.* ³¹ *Therefore be on the alert.*

One of the requirements in testing the qualifications of an elder according to Paul is that he be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). He expands on this in Titus 1:9-11. The overseer is one who holds firmly:

Titus 1:9-11 – ⁹ the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. ¹⁰ For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, ¹¹ who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not *teach* for the sake of sordid gain.

Strauch notes other areas that need protecting: seeking lost, straying sheep; disciplining sin; admonishing improper behavior; and stopping bitter infighting. The elder, then, is to protect against error, seek the lost, and correct sinful behavior.⁶

This protection is needed because sheep are defenseless animals. The people of God need to be shepherded because they are defenseless against the onslaughts of wolves, especially those appear to be sheep. The shepherd must remain spiritually alert at all times. They must be watchful and prayerful. They must be aware of changing issues in culture and the church. They must be diligent in their own spiritual disciplines so that they can have the spiritual strength and courage to protect. And most of all, like the Chief Shepherd, the elder must be willing die before he allows wolves to devour the flock.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones noted that one of the greatest areas of grief for the pastor and distress in the body comes from those who err in majoring on minors. He noted, “We have somehow got hold of the idea that error is only that which is outrageously wrong; and we do not seem to understand that the most dangerous person of all is the one who does not emphasize right things.”⁷ So the role of the protector is to guide the flock in focusing on Christ and Him crucified, just like Paul did when he intervened in the dissension caused by those at Corinth who abused their liberties. It is OK to have opinions and exercise your liberties, as long as you keep the main thing the main thing!

4. Caring (Sincere)

The elder must be a people person. The elder more than any other person in the body must be willing to invest time with the flock. Strauch states, “This means visiting the sick; comforting the bereaved; strengthening the weak; praying for *all* the sheep, even those who are difficult; visiting new members; providing counsel for couples who are engaged, married, or divorcing; and managing many of the day-to-day details of the inner life of the congregation.”⁸

Of course, this work is not done to the exclusion of the body. If elders are leading well, managing well, then the body will be involved in some of this work, especially the deacons. But the elder is responsible to know and meet the needs of the church. This is one of the reasons that Steve and I are meeting with you in your homes. We want to engage in spiritual discussion that will help us to better be able to lead you and feed you and protect you. Different sheep have different needs.

This caring is born out of the love that the elder has for his people. Isaiah 40:11, “Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry *them* in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing *ewes*.” When the flock sees love like this, they are drawn to the shepherd. When they see how compassionate and sincere he is in caring for them, they will know that he is one that they can depend on.

⁶ Strauch, 18.

⁷ Strauch, 21, from D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, 2:244.

⁸ Strauch, 29.

Of course, this all comes as we will see next week as the undershepherd reflects the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. He demonstrated the care of a great Shepherd, so that we can always attest of Him, “The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps. 23:1).

Conclusion

1. Shepherds have sheep that willingly follow (Paul – imitate me)

1 Corinthians 4:14-17 – I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet *you would not have* many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, *be imitators of me*. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

1 Corinthians 11:1 – *Be imitators of me*, just as I also am of Christ.

1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 – *You also became imitators of us and of the Lord*, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

Hebrews 13:7 – Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, *imitate their faith*.

2. Pray for your elders

Paul concluded both of his letters to the Thessalonians, “Brethren, pray for us” (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1). The writer of Hebrews implored, “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things” (Heb. 13:18).

3. Make your elders calling joyful

Hebrews 13:17 – Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 – ¹² But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.