

GOD'S SHEPHERDING CARE FOR HIS PEOPLE
1 PETER 5:1-4

My grandfather was a farmer. He emigrated to Canada from Russia in the early 1920s and was a very successful farmer. As a young boy, I remember going out to the fields with him on his tractor and picking up rocks and other impediments from the field for him. He had all the cool farm implements and I loved to go to his barn and crawl all over his tractors and pretend to drive them. I remember the mixed odor of oil, fuel, and hay in that barn; *I loved* that smell. And I am particularly scarred by the memory of one particular chicken slaughtering day — the sight of a headless chicken running around the barn is not something that is easily erased from one's memory!



My grandfather was a farmer. He probably would be at least a little disappointed to know just what a city-slicker I am. I might live in a small county 45 minutes outside a big city, but I'm still a city slicker.

My grandfather was a farmer. My Father is a Shepherd. He's a magnificent Shepherd. In fact, He is the Great Shepherd. There is no Shepherd like my Father. He understands sheep — especially *His* sheep. He is wise in finding them when they wander; He is powerful to protect them when they are attacked (He has never lost any of His sheep); He is patient with them when they do silly and sinful things. I speak, of course, of God, our Father in Heaven, the Omnipotent of the universe, and the Shepherd of His sheep.

Isn't it interesting that while shepherds were despised people in Israel — perpetually unclean (both physically and ceremonially), generally uneducated, and at the bottom of the socio-economic scale — God identified Himself as a Shepherd. As far back as Joseph's story (Gen. 48:15), God is identified as shepherd.

What does a shepherd do? The shepherd protected the sheep (Num. 27:17; Is. 31:4); the shepherd leads the sheep (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 80:1); the shepherd is the master of the sheep (1 Kings 22:17); the shepherd provides for the sheep (Ps. 23:1); the shepherd nurtures and feeds the sheep (Ps. 28:9; Is. 40:11; Jer. 3:15; Jn. 21:15-18); the shepherd is compassionate toward the sheep (Mt. 9:36). Shepherds who don't do that are unfaithful and condemned (Is. 56:11; Jer. 10:21; 12:10; 23:1ff; Ezk. 34:2ff).

Then, when God explained how to others were to care for His people, He also picked the imagery of shepherds. It was the imagery He used for King David to lead Israel (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:72), and it was the imagery He used of the spiritual leaders of Israel (1 Chron. 17:6; Jer. 3:15). And it is the imagery He uses for those who will lead His church. How do you care for God's people? How do you disciple and train and equip people to follow God? You care for them in the same way that a shepherd cares for his sheep.

This morning we continue thinking about spiritual disciplines in the New Year. We've talked about Scripture, prayer, and evangelism. Today we talk about the church and the role the church has in caring for the people entrusted to it. It's appropriate for us (at GBC) to think about this today, particularly because we have just affirmed men to serve as our elders and deacons. At the end of the service we will pray for them and over them, thanking God for them and asking God to equip them to serve us and lead us well.

As we move towards that prayer, we want to look at one passage that will instruct us about the role of shepherds and elders. What are they and what do they do?

The apostle Peter may have been a fisherman by trade, but he was a shepherd by the appointment of Christ. Peter tells us about the spiritual care of God's people through the role of shepherds. From him we learn:

GOD CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE THROUGH THE LOVING CARE OF HIS SHEPHERD-ELDERS.

As we think about this shepherding role, we will see three aspects of the shepherd's life; what are these shepherds who are our elders to be like? Let's consider their duty, motives, and reward:

1. The Shepherd's DUTY (vv. 1-2a)

- ✓ Shepherding is a DIVINE responsibility
- ✓ Shepherding is a MUTUAL responsibility
- ✓ Shepherding is a CARING responsibility

2. The Shepherd's MOTIVES (vv. 2b-3)

- ✓ A shepherd is a VOLUNTEER
- ✓ A shepherd is SACRIFICIAL
- ✓ A shepherd is EXEMPLARY

3. The Shepherd's REWARD (v. 4)

1. The Shepherd's DUTY (vv. 1-2a)

• Shepherding is a DIVINE responsibility

- ✓ The main verb in this sentence is actually in verse two — ***shepherd the flock of God***.
 - We will expand this idea when we get to the end of the verse, but to shepherd means to provide care for those who need it. It is to “admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thess. 5:14).
 - What we should notice right now is that ***shepherd*** is a command. There is a sense of urgency here: get busy about the task of caring for the flock.
 - ... We are to be busy in shepherding because it is a ***beloved flock***. It's not just a “flock” — a gathering of people, but the term is a diminutive — “little flock” — it's a term of endearment. They are God's beloved flock of people.
 - ... We are also to be busy in shepherding the flock of God ***among you*** — that is the specific group of people that God has entrusted to the shepherds and put under their care. In v. 3, Peter will say they have been ***allotted to your charge*** — God has sovereignly placed them under your care. So the shepherd does well to care for them.
 - ... I often think to myself, “Of all the shepherds in the world who might care for *this* person with *this* particular need, God has entrusted that one to me and to us. What a privilege that He has entrusted the care of this soul to me; I must get about the task of caring for him!”
 - ... God has given the people and He has given a mandate — the elders have a responsibility to fulfill that mandate.
 - We should also notice that the flock belongs to ***God***; it is ***His*** flock. GBC is not my church or my pulpit; it's not the elder's church or pulpit. This is God's church. We are ***God's*** people. We are united by Him and we live for Him. We are gathered by Him now and we will be gathered to Him in eternity. Like all things, the church belongs to God and is for God's glory.
 - That means that every shepherd is not an ultimate shepherd; he is an undershepherd. He has been appointed by Christ for a short season to take care of one part of Christ's immense church.
- ✓ While the main verb is near the end of the sentence, don't overlook everything that comes before it:
 - The responsibility to shepherd is an ***exhortation*** from Peter. This is not merely his suggestion; it is an appeal and command of God, given through Peter, to the churches of Asia (1:1).
 - He also says this as one who is also an elder — he is a ***fellow elder***. He knows the responsibilities. He is not commanding these elders as an apostle, but appealing to them as a co-laborer — “work with me; let's go together as fellow-workers to care for God's people” (“you're not alone...”).

- He also says this as a **witness of the sufferings of Christ**. “Witness” has two connotations:
 - ... Someone who *observed* something — in this case the crucifixion of Christ.
 - ... Someone who *proclaims* the message of the occurrence — here Peter means the proclamation of the essential message of Christ’s sufferings, salvation in Christ alone.
- ... I wonder if we also aren’t meant to remember Peter’s observation of Christ’s sufferings and his failure to testify for Christ when questioned three times, and then his three-fold restoration by Christ in Jn. 21, where he was called to shepherd God’s people.
- ... Peter is encouraging the elders that not only he, but all believers, are equipped to testify about the sufferings of Christ — “I witnessed and testify to Christ’s sufferings, and so do you, so let’s get on with that task of applying that truth to the sheep He has entrusted to us.”
- And he compels the elders to shepherd as one who is a **partaker of the glory that is to be revealed**... Peter is a personal partaker in the glory that is coming. He has tasted the beginning of it in salvation, but still awaits the fullness of it in Heaven. And Peter wants to share the life of Christ with others, and that is one great privilege of being a shepherd, “so let’s get on with it...”
- ✓ When you consider the command (**shepherd**) and the basis for the command, it is clear that this is not just some human “idea.” It is the purpose and intention of God. It’s a *divine* command.

- **Shepherding is a MUTUAL responsibility**

- ✓ It’s a small thing, but it’s an important thing to notice that Peter addresses himself to the **elders** (plural, not singular). While no specific number is mandated, there is more than one elder in the church. There is a plurality of elders (cf. **Acts 20:17**; **Tt. 1:5**; 1 Tim. 5:17).
- ✓ So there is more than one elder; they work together as one harmonious group, with no single elder having authority over any of the others. They are co-equal in position and loving in the way they carry out their duties in the body. No one has priority or pre-eminence.
- ✓ What is an elder’s role? There three primary words for elder in the NT (they are used interchangeably, **Acts 20:17, 28**): “elder,” “overseer” (“bishop”), and “pastor.” Combined, they provide a clear picture of what the pastor is to do: *elder* points to spiritual maturity of the leader, *overseer* points to his responsibility to provide care as a guardian, and *shepherd* points to the responsibility to feed and teach the Scriptures to the church. [MacArthur]
- ✓ In our context some elders are paid and some are not (“some are paid to be good and some are good for nothing!”), but the point here is that the care of God’s people is divided among several men who function *equally* as elders. No single person is able to care for a church (except the *God-Man*); God has provided multiple men to care for His people. And in this context, Peter specifically points to the fact that the care is given by elders — godly, mature, capable, established, wise men (not perfect men, but mature men). And they work together for one goal of caring for the beloved flock.

- **Shepherding is a CARING responsibility**

- ✓ I skipped over one of the key words in this opening sentence: ***therefore*** (v. 1). This instruction in this sentence is because of the circumstance explained in the previous section — and the rest of the book. The reason the church needs shepherds is because the people are being persecuted (4:12, 19; 1:1; 2:18-21; 3:14; 5:9). In every chapter, the apostle alludes to their suffering. And the temptation in suffering is to run, to give up, to despair, to quit, to turn away from Christ.
- ✓ The shepherd's responsibility is (in part, and perhaps primarily) to care for people who are attacked, weak, wounded, needy. To be a shepherd means to care for those who are struggling. That doesn't mean that all people will always struggle; in God's grace, churches can be healthy and strong (as GBC largely is). But it does mean that it is the nature of our humanity to be weak. As long as we have this flesh and our spiritual flesh (which we will have until we die), we will always be susceptible to struggling, and the shepherd (who is also weak and needy!) has been put in the role of helping people go to God.
- ✓ Remembering the analogy of *shepherding* in this passage, it's helpful to remember that *sheep* are defenseless, they have no natural ability to defend themselves from attackers (or offensively attack in return); they are not strong, and they are not fast to run away from the attacker. If they will survive an attack, it will only be because someone has protected them. That's the role of the shepherd — to protect. So, because spiritual sheep will suffer, they ***therefore*** need a shepherd to care for them. The shepherd's role is to protect them from outside attack, care for them when they are wounded, and to take them to the Great Shepherd (2:25; cf. **Acts 20:28**).

2. **The Shepherd's MOTIVES (vv. 2b-3)**

- *Why* we do things matters. It's not enough to do right things; doing right things for the right reasons is important. Others may not be able to see why we do what we do, but the Lord will and He does evaluate that and He will evaluate that for all people (1 Cor. 4:5). So *why* elders shepherd people is essential, too.
- As Peter talks about the elder's motives he does so with three pairs of contrasts: a positive and a negative — “not this, but that...”

- **A shepherd is a VOLUNTEER**

- ✓ Elders don't do what they do ***under compulsion***. They aren't forced or constrained to do their task. You know what that is: that's what you do with feeding broccoli or brussels sprouts to five-year-olds. Compulsion is what teenagers are faced with when making their beds and doing homework.
- ✓ The elder doesn't do what he does because “I have to...” He won't show up to counsel, or at your hospital room, or at a home group and say, “I'm only here because I have to be here.” It's a joy.

- ✓ He wants to do what he does — he does it **voluntarily**. “Sign me up...send me in, coach.” Cf. **Is. 6:8**. Isaiah went even when he was warned that his ministry would be rejected. And they volunteer, because that is the revealed **will of God** for them to do (v. 2; cf. Heb. 13:17).
- ✓ Know that the men who serve as your elders are only compelled by an inward desire to please the Lord (they have an appropriate desire to serve you — **1 Tim. 3:1**). No one has been arm-twisted to this role. Caring for sheep can sometimes be messy and tiring, but the elder who is not serving by compulsion says, “It’s my joy.” They follow the example of the Great Shepherd who said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work” (Jn. 4:34; cf. 5:30; 6:38). And that’s what we have at GBC (by God’s grace).

- A shepherd is **SACRIFICIAL**

- ✓ A shepherd is not motivated by **sordid gain** — he is not “shamefully greedy.” He does not live for financial gain and he does not exploit others for financial gain. The term here particularly focuses on taking advantage of others and acquiring money dishonestly. (Aside: if you see a church where people are being exploited and the elders are wealthy at the expense of the people, that’s not a biblical ministry.) That doesn’t mean that he can’t have financial resources or that he can’t be compensated for his labors (1 Tim. 5:17-18). But it does mean that money can’t be his motive. He might have money, but his money doesn’t have him. His heart desire isn’t financial prosperity.
- ✓ Instead, he serves **with eagerness**. He is enthusiastic and zealous to care for God’s people. He is readily willing to engage in caring for God’s people (**Phil. 2:17**).
- ✓ Do you notice the contrast here? He doesn’t take greedily from the flock, but gives himself generously. He doesn’t serve to “get;” he serves to “give.”

- A shepherd is **EXEMPLARY**

- ✓ You are familiar with the saying, “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” That is a common saying because it’s a common occurrence. There is a temptation to misuse leadership and authority for selfish ends. But not for the godly elder. He serves, **not as lording it over those allotted to [his] charge**. He doesn’t exercise “complete control.” He doesn’t impose his power over others for his own personal advantage. He doesn’t intimidate. He is not a Diotrephes (**3 Jn. 9-10**).
- ✓ He doesn’t exert “lordship” over others because he realizes the flock is **allotted** to him. They are entrusted to him and he is merely a steward over them, caring for them in the Lord’s place. They have been called by God to this task and that’s the way they carry it out — *for Him*.
- ✓ Instead, they **prove to be examples to the flock**. They live exemplary lives. They are not perfect, but they are the kinds of people that one can follow (like Paul, 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6).
- ✓ Every elder should feel the weight of the requirements of 1 Tim. 3:1ff; but every elder (and every man), indwelt by the Holy Spirit, can fulfill that calling and be worthy of following.

3. The Shepherd's REWARD (v. 4)

- What's in it for a shepherd? Is there a payback? Is there a benefit to this daunting task?
 - ✓ In a healthy church (like GBC), there are immense privileges and joys. There is satisfaction of working with like-minded men and serving a loving congregation, where there is no distinction of "us" and "them." We are all just working together to serve Christ. (I regularly say what the psalmist says: "the lines have fallen to me in pleasant places..." I am overwhelmed with gratitude that God would allow me to serve for such a long time in such a grace-filled place.)
 - ✓ But not all men serve in such places. Some men (I know a number of them) serve in hard places. Really hard places. They serve in places where elders and deacons are not believers and do not act like believers and harm the people and manipulate the flock for their own gain (**Jer. 23:1-2, 14-17**).
 - ✓ Is there benefit and gain and reward for a shepherd in that position? Indeed there is!
- *When the Chief Shepherd appears...*
 - ✓ This is a reminder that while elders serve the church, the service is only temporary until the One and only Great and **Chief Shepherd** returns for His people. He is primary and He will care for His people ultimately and eternally, because only He is ultimately responsible for them.
 - ✓ Christ laid down His life for His sheep (Jn. 10:11), and He will return to take over daily care of them.
 - ✓ And when returning to care for His sheep, He will also give ***the unfading crown of glory***. In ancient times, victors of competitions would receive wreaths as a sign of their victory; but some wreaths were made from the amaranth flower which was said never to fade; the word "unfading" comes from the same word for the amaranth flower — the reward for the elder won't ever diminish in glory. It is a reminder of everything related to salvation that we receive from God is preserved eternally (cf. **1:4-5**).
 - ✓ Why does the elder do what he does? He serves the way he serves, trusting that the Lord will balance all the accounts, make all things right, and recompense any cost he pays in glory. He doesn't need reward or recognition now when he knows God will give him what is right in eternity.
 - ✓ In a way, he is doing what all believers can and should do — we live now, looking for the reward of Heaven and God's eternal gifts of grace to us (**Jn. 12:26**; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 3:15). Heavenly reward is a common motive for godly pursuits (and we shouldn't be ashamed of that motive).

CONCLUSION: There is a passage in the Psalms that speaks of the responsibility of David in caring for the people of Israel; it is a passage for King David, and for the sovereign King that would come from David's line to reign on David's throne for eternity.

But it is also an exemplary statement about how leaders lead and how shepherds shepherd:

From the care of the ewes with suckling lambs He brought him
To shepherd Jacob His people,
And Israel His inheritance.
So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,
And guided them with his skillful hands. (Ps. 78:71-72)

God brought an unimpressive man who was nothing in himself and asked him to lead His people with integrity and skill, with character and competence. That is the same calling today for shepherds of Christ's church, for shepherds of this church. We thank God for the shepherds He has given us. We commend those shepherds to Him that they might care well for us — even as Christ cares well for us.

As we close this morning, let us pray for the men God has given to care for us — the elder-shepherds and the deacons who work alongside them.

BENEDICTION: Acts 20:28-32