

The Flock of God (1)

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn this morning to 1 Peter chapter 5. We're going to focus on this chapter for both ends of the day today, looking at the second part of it this evening, and this morning we'll look at verses 1 to 4 especially.

1 Peter chapter 5, I'm reading at the beginning. 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 to be revealed.

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, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. 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. One of the most frequent images used in the Bible of the relationship between God and his people is that of a shepherd and his flock.

[1 : 19] All the way through from the Old Testament right into the New Testament, and indeed Jesus himself used it as well. When you go back to the Old Testament, you'll find that in God's specification for the role of kings, which of course many of them didn't live up to, but the role that was given to a king was very often described as a pastor of the people.

He was to be a shepherd of the people. That was very much part of his remit as a king set over the people of Israel. And it was in relation to their abuse of power that God very often referred to them as not shepherding the people properly, and in fact scattering and causing havoc, rather than having the shepherding care of people that they ought to have.

And that follows through from the Old Testament, and even in Psalms of praise, like we'll finish ourselves this morning with Psalm 100, which of course speaks about the Lord and his flock, that we are his flock, and he takes us for his people.

And again, that's the same image that's used there. And of course Jesus, in chapter 10 of John, John's Gospel described himself as the good shepherd. And in certain parables and sayings, brought up this imagery of the shepherd and the flock to again capture for us the important, precious relationship between God and his people.

And the very writer of this epistle, you remember that he came after he had lapsed, after he had denied the Lord three times. In John 21, you find his restoration.

[2 : 58] Jesus interviewed him, he took him apart, there separately and individually, and questioned him, especially regarding his love. Do you love me?

And every time that Peter answered, Jesus also added these words, feed my lambs, feed my sheep, feed my lambs.

The word he used was pastor, pastor my sheep, pastor my lambs, shepherd, which is the same as pastor, shepherd my lambs, shepherd my sheep. So there was Peter, you see, being restored by Jesus, coming to have this important meeting with Christ to set his life right again.

And this is what Jesus laid upon his heart and instructed him to do. Go now and be a shepherd to my people. And that same Peter is using that imagery here as he speaks to the elders, as he comes to the end of this letter to those that he's described as scattered throughout all these regions he mentions at the beginning of chapter one.

And it's as if he's now saying, yes, you're scattered throughout all of these regions. You're not able to actually come to to be together necessarily in any one place. But you elders, I want you to think of this as God's flock.

[4 : 14] And it's your responsibility to shepherd them, to pastor them so that they are under your shepherding care. And then, of course, Peter goes on, as we'll see more this evening, to deal with those who are under the care of those shepherds or those pastors or elders of the flock.

And he ends the letter in this way that shows the tremendous importance of the relationship between those who lead and those who are led in any given congregation or church.

I mean, that's really such an important issue that you cannot really but come back to it again and again. The relationship between the leaders of the church and by that we mean here the elders.

And in this instance, in your own case, it will be the elders as well, particularly during a time of vacancy. And that relationship between elders, between the leaders and the people is absolutely vital to the well-being of the congregation itself.

One of the truly rewarding, precious things that I have, can reflect on over the years that I've been with you is how close that relationship has been between the leadership of this congregation and those of you under that leadership.

[5 : 38] And how that itself has, I'm sure, been part of the way that the congregation has developed in a satisfactory way. Though we would have seen, of course, much more of that. Nevertheless, that relationship is so important.

And that's why we're really focusing on it today so that we can take from our studies today that which we're going to carry with us into this new chapter in our lives. My life and your life.

Our life is going to go on, God willing, as God will enable us in a different context. But this is going to remain relevant to us. For me, as one of the leaders in any congregation, in a new congregation, I have to obviously take this with me.

I have to apply this. I have to live by this. And you yourselves, too, as elders and people, will find much in this passage to instruct you, to guide you, to teach you, to build you up, to remind you in these days to come of what it means to be the flock of God and what it means to lead and to be led as the flock of God.

Let's look at, first of all, what he says here to those who are leaders. Now, there's an overlap, of course, because some of the things he says here to the elders are also applicable in principle, such things as he's saying here about willingly taking on the service of the eldership.

[7 : 02] Well, that, of course, applies to those who are led as well. We are willing participants in the church of God. It's not something we're forced into doing. We want to do. We want to do it for the Lord because he is so important.

And here he's saying, first of all, to those who lead. And there are four things that are mentioned here in respect to them. First of all, what they are, what they are called.

They are elders. Secondly, what they are to do. They are to shepherd the flock of God. Thirdly, how they are to do it. They are to do it willingly. They are to do it not domineeringly.

They are to be examples to the flock. And fourthly, the reward that is promised them at the end of their course that when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

What a great promise that is to those who take the responsibility and use that responsibility properly of being elders in the church of God. Let's look at them briefly. They are, first of all, elders.

[8 : 06] I exhort the elders. Now that word, so, we could have said something and that's actually the word, therefore. And it fits into the whole way in which Peter is emphasizing the importance of this relationship.

He's been talking about a people who are undergoing really tough times, really suffering for their faith. There are people who are scattered. There are people facing many challenges. He's been teaching them of where suffering fits into the life of Christians, of a Christian congregation or people.

And now he's coming in the light of all that to say, therefore, therefore, focus upon this relationship. Therefore, you elders especially, he says, the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings, shepherd the flock of God.

Elders were, in the Old Testament, first of all, it was something that was where people in terms of their age were set up as leaders in the congregation or in the body of the people of Israel.

Way back in the times of Moses, for example, you'll find in Exodus chapter 3, Exodus 24, there were elders there. They were chosen because of their experience, their seniority in years.

[9 : 24] But it developed from there into thinking of the eldership in terms of an office, in terms of an appointed leadership, which is not necessarily to do with age, though certainly it is something where experience ought to be and must be a factor in choosing elders.

But it became something which by the New Testament times was a specific office in the church. You'll find Paul, for example, and Barnabas and others ordaining elders in the churches that were newly set up in the time of the apostles.

And these elders were set up to be spiritual leaders or indeed rulers of these congregations. And it's important that the word elder actually does indicate somebody who rules, somebody who is set by God in charge of a congregation.

We'll see in a minute that that doesn't mean domineering or just being bossy or just going out of the way to show that they are in charge. It has to be done as we'll see with love, with patience and all the other factors that are in it.

But they are leaders. They are as elders rulers of the church. That's why there are such things as meetings where elders discuss things to do with the spiritual life of the congregation and where they participate in the likes of meetings of presbytery.

[10 : 51] Now why is that important? Well it's important for a number of reasons but it's important from this point of view that in some cases today you actually find people in congregations thinking that elders as they are set up for each district where they live are really just like politicians that they are representatives of the people.

That it's the people's will that they actually come to present in the way they take decisions and that there isn't really an element of rule at all in them that we should just think of them as representatives and therefore they consult the people for any decisions that they need to take.

Now I'm not saying that elders should never consult the people or that people should never come to elders with their opinions. Nothing like it at all. Not saying that at all.

But you have to maintain the fact that elders do rule. That they are spiritually responsible to govern a congregation. to take decisions as to people's lives in terms of their discipline as Christians and also such things as admission to sacraments, the baptism, the Lord's Supper.

They are exercising a role in doing that. And therefore it's important to Peter and to the New Testament writers that those who are led acknowledge that these people who lead them are indeed appointed by Jesus to rule in his church under his overall leadership.

[12 : 26] So that's an important point in itself. It is an office of rule. But you see he's saying here himself who also am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ.

He's actually including himself though he's an apostle. He's saying really basically but I also am a shepherd. I'm an elder. I'm not above in terms of pastoring the people.

I'm not above these elders. I'm one of them. I'm one of you. That too is true of us as ministers. We are here as preaching elders sometimes it's put.

But in terms of rule in the congregation, in terms of pastoral responsibilities and the carrying out of those duties, we are not above the elders. We are not set in a position where we rule over the elders and then they rule over you as a people.

The minister is an elder, a leader along with, alongside of the others. The only difference is that he's appointed to preach the word, which of course itself has its own importance.

[13 : 33] The reason I'm saying that is that Peter is obviously concerned here that people would acknowledge that it's as people, as God's people, as the flock of God, as they gel together, as they combine together, as they harmonize together, as leaders and led, that that's the way to progress and the way to further establishing the kingdom of God.

And it does mean this as well, that whenever elders carry out their duties as leaders of the church, whether it's going to people's homes, times, whether it's at times of bereavement, for example, and going to meet with families, that is of equal validity to a visit from a minister.

Because they are themselves pastors of the flock. That's the word that Peter is here using. I exhort the elders among you to shepherd the flock of God.

So you will be giving the elders who have added responsibilities and burdens at a time of vacancy. You, I'm sure of this, will be giving these elders the place that God has given them.

They are going to be your leaders, your pastors, as they are now. But with the extra burden laid upon them, it's important to them that you as a people recognize who they are, why God has placed them where they are, and to acknowledge that, as we'll see tonight, in all that he says in the remainder of the chapter, where he says especially in terms of humility and acceptance of their offers, and they of your position too, that together the congregation will progress in harmony and spiritual vitality.

[15 : 22] So that's the first thing, they are in fact elders, but what are they to do? They are to shepherd the flock of God that is among you. He's talking here directly to the elders. Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, or that that is your lot, and exercising the oversight.

They are to be shepherds. Now it's important that Peter actually says, shepherd the flock of God. They are not the flock of the elders.

They are not the flock of the minister. And although sometimes as ministers we perhaps refer to my congregation, it's only really hopefully, whenever we say that, we're only saying it's my congregation in the sense that that's where I've been placed to minister the gospel.

It's not my congregation in terms of ownership. It's God's congregation. They are the flock of God. And whether we're ministers or elders, that actually helps us keep a perspective when we're carrying out our duties, when we're involved in pastoring a people, whatever that's going to entail, we always have to keep in mind, these are not my people.

They're God's people. They're God's flock. And when you actually go back to Acts chapter 20, where we read that very emotional chapter where Paul is saying farewell to these elders from Ephesus.

[16 : 52] He called them to meet him. He knew that he was never going to see them again. I'm only moving seven miles up the road.

I'm pleased that I was able to read that chapter, knowing that that part of it, by God's grace, by God's will, is not going to be true. We are going to see one another again, even if not as minister and people.

And I'm deeply thankful for that. But here is Paul, and just imagine how difficult that was for him at that moment. If it's emotional for me and for you today, imagine what it must have been like for him.

There he was, not just knowing that he would never see them again or they his face again, and the weeping and the emotion that obviously is mentioned there, you can understand that.

Not only that, but he says to him, I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in amongst you, and people will rise up from among yourselves who will lead many disciples astray.

[17 : 54] How difficult that would have been for that man of God, leaving that people, these elders, and knowing this devastation was going to take place afterwards.

Thankfully again, that surely will not be the case with yourselves. Please God. And what I'm getting to is this point where Peter there, where Paul there mentioned, pastor the flock of God, using the same language as Peter is using here, pastor the flock of God, which he has purchased, the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.

It's a tremendous responsibility being an elder. You're looking after people that are described in the Bible as the church of God. And they're not only described as the church of God, his possession, but one for which he has given his very life.

Jesus has died in order to create a church. He gave his life to redeem his people. And when we're exercising this God-appointed office of eldership, we're very conscious of the fact that we are placed in charge of people who are described as people belonging to God, and at great cost to himself, have been purchased by the blood of Christ.

And that will, of course, always help those in the eldership to remind themselves that what they're really looking after is the flock of Jesus.

[19 : 48] That they're doing it in his name and in a sense in his place, though he, of course, pastors as the chief shepherd from heaven. But it will always help the elders to keep a proper perspective to realize that this, in fact, is who they're looking after.

That this is the flock of God. shepherd. And that's what Peter is doing here as well. Shepherd the flock of God. And, of course, the imagery of shepherd and flock in a natural sense carries over into the spiritual as well.

What does a shepherd do for his sheep? Or for her sheep? Well, that shepherd, to be a shepherd effectively and properly, will be looking after the flock in certain things, such as feeding them, making sure they've got food and water, making sure they're looked after in terms of any diseases that might come amongst them, looking after their physical well-being, looking out for any signs of distress or whatever in the flock.

They'll be there to defend them, to take care for them, to make sure that any injuries to them are looked after, looked after properly. So, so many things in a natural sense that carry over into the spiritual.

Caring, feeding, spiritual nourishment, looking after, watching over, defending, all of that comes into it in the spiritual leadership of elders shepherding the flock of God.

[21 : 25] And then he goes on to speak about how they are to exercise the oversight of it. Exercising oversight. That word is the word from which we get the word bishop in English.

Being bishops is really what it says. And of course, as Presbyterians, we don't believe in having bishops in the episcopal sense. A bishop is somebody in the episcopal church or the Anglican church.

A bishop is somebody who is set as a primus, somebody who is actually in the primary position and can actually tell certain ministers, right, I want you to leave where you are just now and you go and actually serve somewhere else.

He's the boss. And sometimes it would be very handy to be a bishop because in certain ways you could actually exercise your own mind and say, right, that's it, that's how it's going to be.

But we're not like that as Presbyterians. Thankfully, we have an eldership. We have a people who are given together under God to take decisions in the exercising of their rule.

[22 : 35] And what he's saying here is that they are to exercise oversight. They are to be bishops. They are to be taking account of all the factors of looking after a congregation.

In other words, just by way of passing, the word bishop and the word elder in the New Testament are essentially the same office. which is why we hold to Presbyterianism rather than Anglicanism or Episcopalianism.

An elder and a bishop in the New Testament really refer to the different functions of the same office. It's an oversight. It's an overseeing.

It's a caring. It's a pastoral responsibility in being carried out and caring for the flock. So that's the idea that he has there.

They are elders. They are to shepherd the flock. And thirdly, they are to do it in the way that he mentions there. Not under compulsion, but willingly.

[23 : 40] In other words, they're not forced into it. They are taking it willingly, but they are in our own system, very rightly, elected by yourselves. People elect their elders and elect their ministers.

They are appointed in the highest sense by Christ. They are his ruling elders. They are his officers. But they are chosen by the people over whom they are going to rule.

They are not entering into it unwillingly or by compulsion, but willingly. Taking it as something that is their privilege, despite the fact that there are heavy responsibilities.

Secondly, he is saying in terms of how they are to exercise of it, not for shameful gain, but eagerly. Even in the apostles' day, there were temptations that office in the church, as well as in society at large, would actually be taken just out of a desire to make some advantage out of it, whether it's financially or whatever.

And Peter is at pains to point out that in the church, that sort of thing has no place, or should have no place. Not for shameful gain, not in order to take advantage of the position and then better themselves by it financially or whatever.

[25 : 04] But he says, eagerly. That's actually more than just in the normal sense of the word being eager to do something.

It has, in a spiritual sense, this idea of being zealous about it. They are not in it for shameful gain, but because they are zealous, because they are zealous for Christ and for his name and for his church and for his cause and for his kingdom to advance.

That's why they're in it. That's what it's about for them. Not for shameful gain, but zealously, with a spiritual zeal for the glory of Christ.

And then he goes on to speak about not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. Now he's going to go on to speak about humility and being subject one to another, and that actually applies to the elders, to the leaders, as much as to the people.

It's a mutual thing. It doesn't say anywhere in this passage that the people are going to be subject to the elders full stop. They are to be subject one to another, humility one to another.

[26 : 20] It's a combined humility. But here he's saying to the elders, they are not to exercise this office in a domineering way. We're all human beings, we're all flawed human beings, we're all failed human beings.

And power corrupts, or can corrupt. happens in the church as well as in society at large. Not just in politics or other areas, it's quite possible that given an elevated position, even in the church, for some people it will prove a huge temptation not to be domineering, not to actually say well this is what I think and that's what counts, this is how it's going to be, whatever the rest of you think.

Peter is saying that's not what the eldership is about. They are to exercise their office, not for shameful gain, but zealously, not unwillingly, but willingly, and not domineering over those in your charge.

And it's interesting here that literally in your charge, really the words are in your lot. In your lot. Because it's a way by which the elders are reminded that what they are given to be in charge over has been apportioned to them by God.

They haven't chosen it for themselves. It's not something to further their career. It's not in fact a career at all. It's something apportioned them. God has given them each of them a lot to look after.

[28 : 02] And in looking after it, they are to be examples to the flock. everything that they would want the flock to be, they are to be examples of it themselves.

Whether it's humility, or tact, or patience, or love, or compassion, all of these great qualities of the Christian life, the elders are to be examples of that.

That's why it's such a huge challenge. Because they are prominent. They are to the forefront. They are people who in many ways will be targeted, and of whom it will be expected that they will actually live the kind of life that they're commending to others.

That's what makes the eldership and the ministry such a great challenge, because we all know we're flawed. We fail so often in our duties and in our lives. But this is what God is saying as our ideal, the goal, the whole purpose, not domineering, but being examples to the flock.

A vital aspect of any leadership is being an example. We can achieve a lot more by example than merely by words.

[29 : 19] It's through of parents, grandparents, husbands, wives. It's also through in the relationships in the church, between those who lead and those who are led.

The elders are to be examples to the flock. of course, being examples means for those who are led, when you see your elders as good examples, it's important that you follow them, that you seek to walk in these footsteps, that you see them leaving when they live lives that are holy lives, and lives committed to Christ.

They are there to be your examples, and when you see them as examples, you follow that example. It's there that God is showing you, this is what I should be as well.

They are examples to the flock. And then he says, when the chief shepherd appears, you elders will receive the unfading crown of glory.

There's a great promise there to the elders in carrying out their responsibilities and their heavy task. When the chief shepherd appears, in other words, he's reminding us again, you're not the owners of this people.

[30 : 34] There is a chief shepherd. And actually, when we think of our flaws and our failures, and the ways in which we ourselves and our persons and our carrying out of the duties of our office as elders in the church, when we do realize that we so often come short of what we should be, Peter is reminding the elders, yes, but it's not actually depending on you ultimately at the end of the day.

The flock is Christ's, and he's the shepherd. He's the pastor. He's the pastor of pastors. And it just comes to mind just now that in that passage in Revelation chapter 7, where we've got that great image of God's glorified people and the final state of rest and God wiping tears from our eyes and no longer any of that left.

And the lamb who is in the midst of the throne shall pastor them. See, that's the final thing that you've got as the state and as the portion of God's people, of all of God's people together.

They are going to be under the eternal, everlasting, perfect pastorship of Jesus in heaven. That's what heaven's going to be. Jesus pastoring his people, leading them to fountains of living water, looking after them as a shepherd shoot his flock.

And it's to that great example that we in our eldership here below always constantly look. We are under the chief shepherd.

[32 : 16] But he says when he shall appear, when he will return, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Now what does he mean by that? Well, it means that the glory itself is the crown.

The glory that he mentions, the glory of final glory with Christ is the crown. That's what's going to crown these elders as shepherds of the people.

The chief shepherd himself is going to do that. It goes back to a time in Paul and Peter's day in the Greek games, for example, those who were victors, those who won their races or competitions, would be given a garland.

And the garland was often made up of amaranth flowers, amaranthus flowers, because the amaranth flower to the Greeks was, because it was long-lasting, it stayed in flower, it stayed intact for a long time compared to other flowers.

and it became an emblem that way of immortality, of everlasting life. And when you put the two things together, here is somebody who has won their race and they're crowned with this garland of amaranth flowers which symbolizes immortality.

[33 : 34] When you put all that together spiritually and realize that as Peter is drawing on that imagery from what he knows around him in those athletic games, what he's saying is it's a combination of life, victory, everlasting.

That's the crown. It never fades, will never die, will never become old, will never need to be replaced or renewed.

That's what he's promising these elders. The promise of course extends to every Christian for that victory, but he's specifically here promising elders who carry out their tasks in this way.

When the chief shepherd appears, then you will receive this unfading crown of glory. And whatever difficulties and hassles there have been in being elders of the church, they're all taken care of.

Christ places that garland upon your heads. And that's what he promises. So that's what he says with regard to those who lead in the church.

[34 : 53] And that's what you yourselves will be taking with you into these weeks and months ahead. And I hope that your vacancy is not too prolonged. But however long it is in God's own timing, which is of course what's important, the eldership will be your leaders.

And they will be your leaders as elders, as shepherds of the flock. They will take care of the flock, not unwillingly, but zealously, not domineering, but being examples.

And they will do it conscious that they serve the chief shepherd, who will give them at last this crown of glory. Lord our God, help us in all our responsibilities to carry them out in due dependence upon you.

We bless you today for your church, for the way in which you have structured it, and for the way in which you give those whom you qualify and gift to be leaders in your church.

We thank you, Lord, for the privilege of serving you in that way. And we pray for those who are elders here in this congregation, that you would help them in the days to come, that you would be their portion richly to give them the strength and to give them the direction that they themselves require.

[36 : 20] And we pray that you would help them together as a body of people appointed by you to rule and to exercise oversight in this congregation. Help them to do so in dependence upon you.

Help them to do so, Lord, taking account of all that your word tells them in regard to the exercise of their office. Hear us now, we pray for Jesus' sake.

Amen.