

Elders - Shepherds of the Flock

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[0 : 00] Now, if you turn with me, please, to the passage read in the book of Acts, chapter 20, and particularly from verse 28, mostly verse 28, but also the verses following on from that.

Pay attention to yourself, a careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God, which you obtained with his own blood.

As I already mentioned, the sermons today are focused upon the election of new office bearers for the congregation, and of course, as you well know, it's always important for us to take our point of departure from that from Scripture itself. And so we're looking this morning at this passage as it gives us teaching in regard to elders and to the duties of elders particularly. We're not going to look particularly at the qualifications in terms of personal character and qualities of those who are elders or would be elders in God's church. They find that in 1 Timothy and chapter 3.

We'll refer to it briefly, but we're not looking mainly at that. We're looking mainly at their duties, their functions as elders, what it is elders are responsible for and for doing what their role is and how they relate to the flock of God, to the people of God, to the church, to the congregation in which they are elders and act as elders. Now, of course, this is a very emotional passage. It was a very emotional time. It's difficult to read the passage. Indeed, it would be wrong probably not to feel pangs of emotion as you read the passage, especially when you come to the end of it where you find these elders in Ephesus having been spoken to here by Paul and given them parting counsel as he was going to leave them. He knew and they knew that they were not going to see him again in this life, and that made them sad, understandably. He was very much their spiritual leader, the founder of that church, the one who had established it by the blessing of God, and here he was saying them, saying farewell to them. And sorrowfully, they say, most of all because of the word he had said that they would not see his face again. But he left them with these directions, directions as to how they should see themselves as elders in God's church and what that meant in regard to their care for the flock. And it's interesting and important that the language he uses, just as 1 Peter uses the similar type of language, he uses the language of shepherding, the language of the Lord's people being a flock and the elders who have oversight of the flock acting as spiritual shepherds. And that's really telling because, in one sense, it's following what Jesus himself is as the over-shepherd, as the chief shepherd, as Peter again calls him in his first letter in chapter 5. And there are two things that come across from the passage here and are before us today. First of all, the duty of care that's mentioned, and secondly, the value of the flock that they have oversight of. The duty of care, first of all, and that too has a couple of parts or sections to it. They have a duty of care, firstly, to themselves.

The elders have a duty of care to themselves. That's how significantly that verse begins. Pay careful attention to yourselves. And then it says, and to the flock, all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. In other words, that order is significant. The elders are to have a duty of care and to look after themselves in order that they may then be in place to look after the flock. If they don't look after themselves, it stands to reason, it's logical, they're not going to be in the best place to look after the flock and the needs of the flock. Just the same as in the ordinary sense.

[4 : 22] A shepherd who doesn't look after himself, who neglects his own life, is not in any fit state to look after the sheep that are given him as his charge. That's the same spiritually for the spiritual flock of God, the people of God, the church of God. Here the elders are counseled by Paul. Pay careful attention to yourselves. That means, first of all, each individual elder has to look after his own life, has to be careful about his own life, his relationship with God, has to be maintained as it should be.

He is to be inwardly and outwardly an example to others in the way that he lives his life, in the way that he attends to his own spiritual needs.

But more than that, or in addition to that, along with that, it's not simply the individual elder that's addressed here as if all Paul is saying is, I want you as individuals personally to look after your own lives. He is saying that, but he is saying plural, pay careful attention to yourselves.

Elders have a duty of care to one another as much as they have to themselves individually. And so every group of elders, you know that we call that in our system a Kirk session, the ruling elders, the overseers, as we'll see in a minute, of the flock of this congregation, they have a duty of care firstly to themselves. Each of them has a duty to look after his own life, to be as he should be before God. But they have a duty to look after one another, to care for one another, to look to the needs of each other, to make sure that whatever arises amongst them, their care, their duty of care, is to look to the welfare of the whole body of elders.

So that if one needs attention, the others don't leave that. They all engage in that duty of care. That's the ideal. Now, we're all human beings. We're all flawed human beings. It doesn't always necessarily work out that way perfectly. Of course it doesn't. But that's the ideal.

[6 : 34] Pay careful attention to yourselves. Elders here are required to do that. That's the responsibility under God. And so it is for prospective elders as well, those who might be appointed elders in the future. This is what you're coming into. This is what your focus is firstly, before you think of what your responsibility is to the people of God. You're joining a group of people who are set by God himself as well as by your election, as we'll see, over the people of God. You're joining a group of people as elders who have the responsibility to look after themselves, to pay careful attention to themselves, to pay heed to each other's needs as a group of people charged with looking after God's flock. So that's the first thing in the duty of care. They have a duty of care to themselves. But then secondly, and more fully Paul deals with, they have a duty of care to the flock. And there are two aspects to that as well. When he says, pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, he then gives more detail to care for the church of God.

And then he specifies that he knows after he has departed, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And when you look at that, the duty of elders is twofold in respect to their duty of care to the flock. It's first of all, to care for them in the sense of attending to their needs, to feed them, to pastor them. It's more than just feeding, as we'll see. It's pastoring, it's looking after them as a shepherd looks after his flock. But then that also includes protecting them, because he speaks here of those that are seeking to cause havoc amongst the flock, the ravaging of wolves. And we'll look more closely at what that means. But just bear in mind, I think it's helpful to bear in mind that in those days, and probably still the same in certain parts of the world, there were no fences just to neatly divide up the areas in which the flocks had to be given pasture.

There weren't such things as crofts or areas of land that were carefully fenced off and that you could say, well, that's my boundary, that's so-and-so's boundary, this is for my sheep, this is where I'll bring my flock and that's my piece of ground. It's clearly demarcated, it's marked out. There is no such thing.

And bear that in mind when we see here that ordinarily, in the ordinary sense of ordinary sheep, when the shepherd moved them to a new pasture, he couldn't say, this is actually my part of it, this is another shepherd's part of it. And in fact, many times the different flocks were mixed together, and sometimes sheep and goats were mixed together in the pasture land. That's why Jesus, in Matthew 25, uses the imagery of a shepherd dividing the sheep from the goats, because that was the practice. The ground was there, it was new pasture, they led the sheep there, others might be there before them, others would actually come there after them. So that's the situation. And of course, that made it much, much more difficult and more onerous for them to protect the flock. The wolves were the main enemy of the sheep, and it was much easier for a wolf when there are no fences and no barriers to actually get in and cause havoc in the flock. And more difficult, therefore, for the shepherd. And you can appreciate in that imagery how important it would be for the shepherd to really be alert and to do what Paul is saying here needs to be done spiritually, pay careful attention to yourselves and to the flock. Pay careful attention. Be alert to the needs of yourselves and be alert to the needs of your flock. Because the wolves, and they're not just outside the flock, as Paul is going to show, they are actually waiting for any opportunity just to break in and cause damage. So what is he saying? Well, he says, care for the flock. Pay careful attention so as

to care for the church of God. Now, to care for is a word literally which means to lead the flock to new pasture. And so you can see how the idea of feeding as well comes into it. Some translations will say, feed the flock of God. And if you go back to what Jesus said to Peter in John chapter 21, remember Peter was being restored there from his lapse, from his downturn in his life spiritually, and Jesus three times asked him, do you love me? Peter three times said he did, and that the Lord knew that he did. And three times Jesus said to him, feed my sheep. Feed my lambs, feed my sheep. In other words,

[11 : 44] Peter was being restored to his position as an apostle, but especially to the shepherd in care of God's people that he had been called to do. And the two words that Jesus used there, one of them is this word here, care, which means pastor them, look after them as your flock. The other word is more specific, actual feeding. So you can see that those two matters are really bound up together in the way in which a shepherd looks after his flock. He leads them to fresh pasture, but he actually also specifically feeds them. He feeds his own flock, and that's the duty of the elders as well. That as they lead the flock to new pasture, as they actually oversee the flock, he is to feed that flock as well as to see to other aspects of their need. He is to pay careful attention to them. They are to do this together as a group of spiritual leaders in God's church, so that they actually tend to the needs of the flock, particularly by teaching them, not just through taking meetings, pray meetings, or other meetings for worship, but as we'll see also, it's actually also involving teaching in a certain way that is more than just formal instruction in a sermon or in an exposition of Scripture, teaching by way of advice, by way of counsel, by way of what Paul calls here admonition. These are the responsibilities of the elder to care for the flock. Now, it's important that we realize from this passage that the teaching of the flock, that the care of the flock is not just the responsibility of the minister.

In our Presbyterian system, we make a distinction between the person who preaches regularly as the minister and the ruling elders that form the kirk session along with him. But in actual fact, we are all elders. We are all shepherds. We all together have the responsibility of shepherding, of caring for God's flock, God's people, the people you are. And Paul is here reminding the Ephesians, as Peter does in his own first letter, that this in fact is the responsibility of the elders together, always at rest as elders, always at rest together, to care for the flock. So, there's a responsibility to feed, to lead into new pastures, to give further instruction, to increase their knowledge, to be with them so that they have questions that may be answered if they can, to be there beside them when they have specific needs and need comfort. All of that is part of the way in which we are charged by God as elders to pay attention to the flock. But then you see, he says also there's the protection because in verse 20 he says, he says, I know that after I am, I have, verse 29, I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And you can see that actually there how that is going to be something which Paul, it was very difficult for Paul because he actually knew that this was going to happen. And he was forewarning these elders that this was going to happen, that this was actually going to take place after he had gone away. And you can read in the second chapter of the book of Revelation, the letter written there to this church in Ephesus, how it was at a very low ebb then. It thought a lot of itself, but it was actually poor and destitute and blind and naked spiritually. They were at a very low ebb and things had gone wrong. Here was Paul anticipating that and saying to the elders, you have to care for this flock for, you need to protect them as well. You need to actually have this kind of protective care of them. Now, the wolves here are actually undoubtedly false teachers. Look at how it goes on to speak. They will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert. In other words, he's saying to them, the danger is not simply outside of your number as a people of God now. The danger also lurks inside. When false teaching can arise from inside the church, as you know very well in the course of history, it has happened many times. Well, the elders are there to actually be alert to that. Not only must their own teaching be of such as is true and faithful to God, but they must also be alert for false teaching, not just from the pulpit, that's by no means excluded, but any false teaching that comes in amongst the people of God or arises from within the number of God's people has to be countered. And all you have to do is just read through the New Testament writings of Paul, of John, and of Peter. And you'll see how important, how frequently stressed false teaching was in the teaching of the apostles. To counter it, to be alert to it, to be aware of the damage it would do.

It's there all the way through these epistles of the New Testament, and indeed it was there in the Lord's instruction as well. So that's the second thing, to protect the flock from marauding wolves, which are particularly emphasized as those who bring, speak twisted things to draw away disciples after them. Heretical views, views not true to Scripture, and views which will tend to draw others away from the gospel and from the truth, and will follow false teaching. It's quite astonishing.

[18 : 06] If you look throughout the world today, it's quite astonishing the kind of things people believe, the kind of things people follow when it's pronounced as being gospel teachers, a gospel teaching by those who appoint themselves very often as gospel teachers, and people who will actually swallow things which you and I can see are blatantly untruthful and untrue to Scripture.

False teaching has the tendency to just take over your heart if you give it that opportunity. That's why the apostles are so careful to strike this note, especially for those who have oversight of the church of God. So that's duty of care to themselves, duty of care to the flock, to care for them, to pastor them, to lead them to new pastors, to teach them, but also to protect them, and especially against false teaching. I think in the passage, when Paul speaks about himself here, he obviously is speaking as an apostle, about himself as an apostle. But in principle, much of what he's saying here can actually apply to what he's saying to the elders as well. And it looks as if he's just speaking of himself in a way that the elders can say, well, here's our example. Here's our example in what we must be, what we must be doing as elders with oversight of God's church. What is he saying about himself? Well, look in verses 20 and 21 and 25 and 27.

Look at how thoroughly and how fully he taught the people. Verse 20, I didn't shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. That's obviously a summary of the teaching that he was giving. Verse 25, I went among you proclaiming the kingdom. And then verse 27, he's saying here, I am innocent of the blood.

I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God, the whole width and breadth and depth and height of the teaching that Christ had given him and deposited with him the gospel.

That's why we cannot shrink from teaching the things that are hard to teach, but necessary for us to learn as disciples of Jesus. So that's the first thing he's thorough in his teaching, but he's also very thorough in his method. Look again at verse 20. I didn't shrink from declaring to you, teaching you in public and from house to house. He didn't just confine his teaching to the public meetings.

[21 : 01] He actually went from house to house. He visited these people. He imparted teaching to them. He came alongside them to teach them, and he says, that's the responsibility of elders. That's what it means to care for the flock. That's part of the caring of the shepherds, by the shepherds of the flock. And that, of course, will involve familiarity with the flock. That's why we insist on the fact that elders are to be visiting elders. They are to visit you in your homes. They are to get to know you where you are. They are to get to know you personally, not just as a formality, not just to discuss the weather and things of that nature, though that can, of course, be part of it. Don't just think that elders visiting your home have to immediately plunge into theological teaching. That is the main aspect of their visit to see where things are at with you spiritually, how it is with you as individuals or as a family, to actually care for you spiritually, to tend to your needs and protect you from the wolves that are out there. But it's their duty to do that. It's their duty to visit. It's their privilege to visit.

And in a congregation as large as this, that's why we have, as you well know, certain districts, around 15 or so districts, so that each, that the elders are actually divided into groups for each of these districts to have two or three, accompanied two by deacons and others that will actually also help them in that duty. But it's their responsibility, mainly their responsibility, to visit from house to house, to teach, to actually engage with people personally, practically, where they are. And that is very important. It's a very important aspect of elders and their work.

Now, some people might feel that if they're working themselves ordinarily, of course, they are. Most of the younger men are, of course, going to be working still. Some of them, perhaps even working away from home and may feel that that is a disqualification, then they're not qualified if this means that they have to visit from house to house and all that's involved in that. Maybe they feel, well, I'm away so much of the time and I have responsibility to my family, so I can't attend to that. Well, remember, you're not on your own. If you're looking at the prospect of being elected as an elder, remember, you're not going to be doing that on your own. It's a work that you share. And if you can't be there all the time, well, if God has endowed you with the gifts of the eldership and if the congregation actually choose you as an elder, acknowledging these gifts and recognizing these

gifts, well, it doesn't matter if you're not there absolutely all the time. Remember that this is a shared work. And remember that you are required to contribute only what you can to the maximum you can. Nobody expects more than we are able to give in the work of the gospel, but the Lord expects that we will give as much as we are able to. So, here he is saying, that's what I did. I taught them from house to house, and therefore elders are to look to be engaged personally and practically in the visitation of the flock. Well, he then comes to the value of the flock, and I'm just going to deal with this more briefly, because when he comes on to the next part of verse 28, pay attention carefully to yourselves, to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood. Now, the interesting thing for a start there is that in this passage you have a reference to each person of the Trinity. Maybe not directly, but when you look at it and look into it closely, each person of the Trinity is involved in what's said. Obviously, the Holy

Spirit is specifically mentioned, and it's the Holy Spirit, he says, that has made you overseers. In other words, you can see the Holy Spirit has made you overseers in the flock of God, and that's really literally how it should be translated, pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which, that's literally what it says, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. It doesn't diminish the fact that they're overseers, that they have an oversight, that they are pastorally involved in looking after the whole flock, but they themselves too belong to the flock. They are in the flock. They have an understanding of what it means to be the flock. They're not actually made elders, and therefore they're detached from the flock, or somehow or other, they're going to be domineering it over the flock.

That's one of the things that Peter says in 1 Peter 5 is not to be the case with elders. They're not to be domineering. They're not to look at their position as if it's saying, well, here I am now. I'm an elder. I'm part of a ruling group of elders, and therefore people just have to do what I say. That's how it was with Diotrephes, a man mentioned in the third epistle of John.

[26 : 33] And John spoke really very vehemently and very frankly about this person. And this Diotrephes had aggregated to himself a position that, for a start, he wasn't worthy of, and that wasn't proper to him.

He was actually looking at himself in a way that just saw himself in charge of things. I'm not suggesting that this is true of anybody here in the session at all. Please don't get me wrong. But this is really what Paul is saying here to the Ephesian elders as well.

I have written you, John says, something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us, and not content with that.

He refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to, and puts them out of the church. Now, John had to address that. That was a problem.

Diotrephes was acting in a way that was just causing dissension and schism and division in the church. He was looking at himself as being absolutely in charge instead of being a servant, and a humble servant, as we all are and should see ourselves as.

[27 : 58] And so, Peter is saying, sorry, Paul is saying here, the Holy Spirit has made you overseers in the church of God. You choose your elders by election, and that's imperative, and that's important.

We regard the choice of the people of God as important, whether it's a minister or elders or deacons that they're choosing. That is your privilege.

That's your prerogative to elect them to office, to cast your vote. But remember, it's the Holy Spirit ultimately who has chosen them, and that means He's the one who has endowed them with the gifts that are requisite for the eldership.

He's the one who has given them the qualities that you recognize when you elect them to elders. So, although your elders in that sense in which you've chosen them, they're actually the Holy Spirit's elders because He has endowed them, and ultimately they are His appointment through your election.

And that, of course, keeps them humble and should keep us humble as well as elders in the church of God. But then he adds something else.

[29 : 20] To care for the church of God which He obtained with His own blood. Theologically, that, of course, has provided a talking point and a problem, indeed, where it talks about the blood of God.

But I think if we translate it in a way that's very right for us to translate, like this, which He obtained with the blood of His own. Which He obtained with the blood of His own.

That brings Jesus into view. It's obviously Jesus in a way that you need to bring into view because the blood of God can only be understood in terms of the incarnation and the Son of God in our nature giving His life.

But He purchased. God the Father obtained this church with the blood of His own. This is not our church. This church doesn't belong to ministers.

It doesn't belong to the eldership. This church belongs to God. This congregation belongs to God. The whole church of God belongs to God. He has obtained it.

[30 : 28] It belongs to Him personally. And not only has He obtained it so that it now belongs to Him and it is His possession, He has obtained it at the cost of the blood of His own.

Now, that's a very powerful reminder to those of us who occupy pulpits and to those of us who are along with that elders in the church. It's a powerful reminder to us that we're not looking after our own church.

We're not to regard this as what belongs to us. What we have by our ability brought together, this is God's church.

And He's obtained it. He's made His own by the blood of His own Son. And that should inspire us as well as humble us.

Sometimes the eldership can be a very difficult, indeed a lonely task at times, though we share the responsibilities.

[31 : 39] Sheep begin lives as very cuddly things, don't they? Lambs, who doesn't like cuddling lambs, who doesn't like the image of a nice fluffy lamb.

They don't stay like that, though. And I remember one of my first experiences of sheep was helping my father and others dip the sheep in a small tank just at the bottom of her croft and tongue.

And there I was, a young lad, I don't know, probably nine or ten, something like that, standing by the fence just round the small enclosure that the sheep were in before they were dipped or after they were dipped.

And I was standing there and this fairly large adult sheep decided to make a run for it and it jumped and unfortunately jumped over the fence just where I was standing and smacked me right in the face.

And I had a black eye for a whole week, had to go to school with it, all of my face down here was bruised. I suppose from that day I wouldn't, well, I didn't really like sheep much, maybe that was the reason why.

[32 : 42] But I did look after sheep for a while and sometimes they're not easy to look after. You have to clean them because they're sometimes very smelly and get very dirty. You have to look to their feet, not a very nice job.

Some of you are probably in love with sheep and I apologize if that's the case, but you know yourselves that it's difficult, it's challenging. A shepherd has a challenging job because sheep are prone or some of them are prone to wander away from the flock and you need to recover them.

And Jesus himself, of course, took account of that in his parables. And when for elders looking after the sheep becomes what we might at least passing through our minds regard as an inconvenience, something you wish you didn't have to do when it becomes a real problem or when some member of the flock or somebody really that you have a responsibility for proves very difficult and you need to go and deal with it, it might take some time, I say to myself and I say to the elders here and I say to those who are prospective elders, remember it's not your flock.

Remember the value God places upon them. Remember they are precious to him. When it's difficult to look after them at times, we have to keep coming back to this.

They're his flock. They're precious to him. The blood of his own bought them. We have no right to regard it as inconvenient to look after them even if it is difficult at times.

[34 : 26] Now all of that might mean that the elders presently who are elders here. And those who are prospective elders particularly might say, well, you know, there's so much in that I'm not sure if I can really handle that.

I'm not sure if I'm cut out for that. I don't think I'm really up to the task. Well, one thing I've said before, remember it's a shared task.

Remember you do it together with others. But remember this too. think of it being an honor before you think of it being onerous.

Think of it as a great privilege before you think of it as a burden. If God has indeed equipped you with all or with many of the things that elders require in order to carry out their function in the church, it should be a very, very difficult thing for anyone in whom that is recognized.

There will be other things. You can find that in the intimation to prevent people being elders. But if the qualities are there, if that's recognized by the church, it should be very difficult then not to accept the will of the church and the will of the Holy Spirit in becoming an overseer with others of the church of God.

[36 : 03] May God bless these thoughts to us. Let's pray. Lord, our God, we thank you for the eldership that we have. We thank you for the way they carry out their tasks.

We thank you for their commitment. We bless you, O Lord, that as we think of those things taught in your word in respect to that. We pray that you would forgive us as elders for the ways in which we come short and for the many ways in which we know ourselves we need to improve in our own lives and in the way in which we carry out our duties.

We pray for the congregation at this time, O Lord. We ask that you would direct us, guide us by your Holy Spirit, show to us the way in regard to the electing of new elders, we pray.

Grant to all who will have a place on the list of eldership prospectively. Lord, we pray for them and ask that you would guide them as they seek to come to a decision in regard to this matter if that is required of them.

So go before us now we pray and hear our prayer for Jesus' sake. Amen. Today we're going to conclude our service this morning by singing Psalm 28.

[37 : 20] Psalm number 28, that's on page 238. And we'll sing from verse 6 to the end of verse 9. The tune is Amazing Grace, page 238.

Forever blessed be the Lord, for graciously he heard the voice of my petitions and prayers did regard. Psalm 28, from verse 6 to the end of the psalm, to God's praise.

Amen. forever blessed be the Lord, for graciously he heard the voice of my petitions and prayers did regard the Lord's my strength and shield my heart upon him did rely and I am help it hence my heart doth joy exceedingly and with my song

I will him praise their strength is God alone he also is the saving strength of his anointed one O thine own people do thou save bless thine inheritance them also do our feet and them forever more advance

I'll go to this side over here this morning now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and evermore Amen