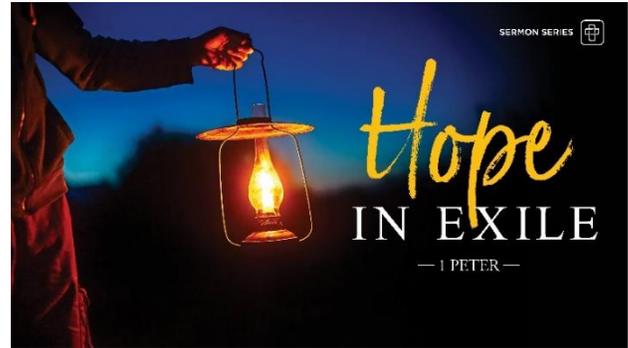


The Way of the Shepherd

1 Peter 5:1-5

David Wollen August 9, 2020



I've been looking forward to opening God's Word together this morning. God is always speaking a fresh word into our lives, into the here and now. What the Holy Spirit led Peter to write in his time is now speaking into our time of uncertainty and unrest. Throughout history, God has used moments like we're in now to refine His people. Right now, I think God is shattering our 21st century delusions of self-sufficiency and superiority. He's crushing our idols of self-empowerment and autonomy. He's reminding us of how very needy and dependent we are on our Creator.

God's Word gives us a powerful metaphor for this in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It's all over. Psalm 100 puts it like this: "*Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*" We're like sheep, aren't we? We're dependent. We have no defense within ourselves to withstand the onslaught from the devil, the world and our flesh, which are always conspiring against us to either draw us or drive us away from the Savior.

This is why we sing, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love." But God's sheep are not alone. We have a Shepherd. We need this thought in our minds as we turn to 1 Peter 5:1-5 this morning. We will not hear this passage correctly unless we keep in mind who we are—the sheep—and Who Christ is—the great Shepherd of the sheep and the chief Shepherd of every undershepherd. So let's turn our attention now to what the Holy Spirit is saying to us. I'll be reading from the Christian Standard Bible.

¹ I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: ² Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.

*All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another,
because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Peter covered a lot of ground in just five verses. Much of this is exhortation or imperative. It's the giving of instructions. What Peter has to say falls into two categories: first, instruction to the elders, then instruction to the church as a whole. When Peter's letter was first distributed to the early church, it was read out loud. Peter knew this and wrote with that in mind. This means everything he said he intended for the entire body to hear—every part, including the exhortation to the elders.

So today if you're thinking to yourself, "Well, I'm not an elder, so that probably doesn't apply to me," could I ask you to think about this in another way? If you belong to Christ and He is your Lord, then what your Lord is speaking to the elders is about matters directly concerning you. The majority of what Peter says to the elders actually translates very much in principle to anyone who serves, leads or teaches within the body. Many of the "one another's" of Scripture are intertwined with aspects shepherding, so there is much for us to glean about how God intends His people to serve and care for one another.

Lastly, Peter is intending you to be a witness to what he is saying to the elders. It's a little like the way a minister might charge the bride and groom in a wedding with the significance of their vows, doing that in the hearing of everyone. There's an accountability aspect to this. Peter is doing something a little bit like that.

Before we get much farther, we ought to be asking, "Why is Peter talking about this at all? Why here, why now? The previous four chapters have been all about suffering for doing what is good. Why is Peter changing the subject so abruptly?"

Imagine for a moment what it must be like to have the responsibility of shepherding God's people in a time and place when persecution is being dialed up. Today there are places around the world where this is the case: Iran, China, North Korea, just to name a few among many. These are places where there are pastors and elders shepherding churches full of believers, every single one of whom faces the real possibility of extreme persecution for their faith in Christ. What must that be like? The churches in the first century are facing the very same kind of thing and Peter knows that.

For the good of the flock, it's critical that elders lead well, and the specific type of leadership elders are called to is described as "shepherding." Sometimes people think of elders like elected officials serving in a term of office. But that's misleading. Elders are not primarily

on a board of directors of an organization, fiduciaries of an enterprise, figureheads or ivory-tower decision-makers who never get their hands dirty. Yes, they are entrusted with leadership responsibilities, but their primary task is shepherding—the care of souls.

That’s why we call our paid elders “pastors,” which comes from the Latin word for shepherd. Everything Peter was about to say to the elders falls under the umbrella statement he makes in verse two: “*Shepherd God’s flock among you.*” Shepherd God’s flock among you. That is a detail worth noticing and is our first point.

The church belongs to God.

We often say things off-the-cuff, don’t we, like “my church” or “our church.” We might refer to “John MacArthur’s church” or “Alistair Begg’s church.” It’s sort of a verbal shorthand we use and not necessarily a big deal as long as we remember the church does not belong to us. It belongs to God. This is particularly important for the hearts of leaders. The church does not belong to any pastor, elder, team of elders or to the congregation as a whole. It is not our church. It’s God’s church.

Now, if you scan over the verses we just read, you’ll notice Peter’s not really getting much into the “what” of shepherding. He’s assuming his listeners know exactly what he’s talking about. We might assume the same thing, except shepherding is not a firsthand experience or common sight in 21st century America. What was familiar to them is only familiar to us through movies or shows we’ve seen or books we’ve read.

Peter is intending that this common knowledge would translate directly into how shepherding happened within the body of Christ. What does that look like? To answer this question, we’ll have to look to a few other places in God’s Word to fill in that gap. To do that, here’s a summary statement to encapsulate where we’re headed.

Christ has entrusted elders to feed and protect His flock as undershepherds.

We’ll unpack both of these categories of responsibility: feeding and protecting.

First, what does it mean to feed God’s flock? For this, we’ll look back to a poignant moment in Peter’s life. The resurrected Jesus appears to Peter on a lake shore. Remember, Peter had failed miserably when Jesus was on trial. Three times he denied that he knew Him. Now Jesus is purposefully reinstating Peter in ministry with three parallel statements, each one of them for one of the times Peter had denied Him. This is from John 21:

¹⁵ *When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”*
“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.”
“Feed my lambs,” he told him. ¹⁶ A second time he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”
“Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.”
“Shepherd my sheep,” he told him.
¹⁷ *He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”*
Peter was grieved that he asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”
“Feed my sheep,” Jesus said.

Peter’s charge to the elders to “shepherd God’s flock among you” is like a passing of the baton. What shepherding elders do—the care of souls—flows directly out of this threefold charge from Jesus to Peter: *“Feed my lambs... Shepherd my sheep... Feed my sheep...”*

By feeding, Jesus is not talking about sharing a meal, as important and as good as that is within the body of Christ. No, Jesus is talking about Himself, the true Bread. We do not *“live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The ministry of the Word, the Lord’s Supper—these are the sustenance of God’s people—our spiritual nourishment. There’s no substitute for this. Without these we’ll soon become spiritually weak and anemic, which will spread out into every part of our lives. There are many who in this time of pandemic have experienced that reality. What Jesus said to Peter by that lake is now seared into his mind and heart, so the call of Christ on elders which he passes on—the call of shepherding—is first and foremost about feeding God’s flock with the Word.

Now let’s look to the other task of shepherding, what it means to protect God’s flock. For this we’ll leave Peter for a moment and spend a few minutes with the Apostle Paul. In Acts 20, Paul is saying his final good-byes to the Ephesian elders. He knows he’s never going to see them again, so he’s giving them his final instructions. Listen to what he says:

²⁸ *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as 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 Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them.*
³¹ *Therefore be on the alert.*

Elders are called to protect the flock from danger. Danger comes in many forms. Certainly there's the kind of danger that makes news headlines. These are not irrelevant. Protecting the most vulnerable, especially the children among us—is this in view? Of course. Protecting church finances from mismanagement? Definitely. A high level of personal integrity, a high standard of conduct for our pastors, elders, deacons and leaders? Absolutely, yes. These things are essential.

But Paul's top concern is that the Ephesian elders protect the flock from false teachers who will stray from the Word, whose teaching will not be in line with the gospel. It's like a counterfeit bill. False teaching is dangerous, not because it's so egregiously different from what the Bible teaches, but because it's so egregiously similar, yet subtly altered in a way that causes the sheep of the fold to stray from Christ.

That's why it's so critical that elders be seasoned in the Word, are saturated in the Word and study the Word with great diligence. This in fact is what our elder team does with frequency when we meet. God's undershepherds are charged to feed and protect the flock; in both cases God's Word is at the very center.

Is there more involved with being an elder? Of course. But this covers much of the waterfront to look at what Peter meant by "shepherd God's flock." That's the "what." Now let's look at the "how."

The way of the shepherd.

Picking up at 1 Peter 5:2-3:

² Shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; ³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

All three of these statements come with a denial and an affirmation. Each of them reinforces the reality that Peter's primary concern is not with the method of the shepherd as much as it is with their motives. Peter is concerned with the hearts of the shepherds. The bottom line is that your heart before God will determine the effectiveness of your service to Him. This applies to just about every kind of service within the body, although Peter is focusing here on the elders.

It's interesting how he begins each of these statements with what not to do. Peter has reason to be concerned. Unfortunately, historically the shepherds of God's people have a

somewhat spotty track record. Of course, Peter is looking back to the Old Testament at this time. He might have been thinking of Ezekiel 34, where—several centuries prior—God confronted Israel’s unfaithful shepherds through the prophet Ezekiel:

² “Woe to the shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding themselves! Shouldn’t the shepherds feed their flock? ³ You eat the fat, wear the wool, and butcher the fattened animals, but you do not tend the flock. ⁴ You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bandaged the injured, brought back the strays, or sought the lost. Instead, you have ruled them with violence and cruelty. ⁵ They were scattered for lack of a shepherd.”

If only this disturbing trend were isolated to the Old Testament or the early church, but it’s not. There have been very public and very tragic modern-day examples, just within the last few years even, that could be described in very much the same way. Well-known pastors, and by implication elders, have been exposed for similar failings. So Peter is right to be concerned, and we are right to be concerned. There are many dangers, toils and snares for those who shepherd God’s flock. When they fall, sheep scatter which puts the flock in grave danger.

Perhaps at some point along the line, something like this has even happened to you. If that’s the case, I’m so sorry. I want you hear the heart of the Shepherd towards you. A few verses later, God says:

¹¹ “See, I myself will search for my flock and look for them. ¹² As a shepherd looks for his sheep on the day he is among his scattered flock, so I will look for my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and total darkness.... ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, bring back the strays, bandage the injured, and strengthen the weak, but I will destroy the fat and the strong. I will shepherd them with justice.”

The church has but one chief Shepherd Who never fails, the Lord Jesus. If you have trusted in His atoning work on the cross, repenting of your sin and following Him as Lord, then what Peter said in 1 Peter 2:25 is true for you: *“For you were like sheep going astray, but you have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”*

If this is not yet true of you, what are you waiting for? You were made by Him and for Him, so come to Him. Come to Jesus, the great Shepherd. The freedom, rest and peace your heart longs for cannot be found anywhere else. *“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12 ESV).

Sheep do not survive on their own. Sheep do not save themselves. Sheep are rescued by the shepherd.

The way of our great Shepherd with His sheep must also be the way of His undershepherds—the elders. They must imitate Christ in their shepherding. This is why they should never serve under pressure or obligation because they feel like they have to. Rather, they should serve with a joyful and willing heart, never because of what they might gain financially. By the way, it was commonplace in the early church—as it is today—for full-time elders to be paid. That was assumed in common practice. That’s not the issue. The issue is greed. The issue is the motive. The issue is the heart.

Financial gain is not the only type of selfish gain that could entice an elder. An elder could be motivated by how church leadership feeds his pride and puffs him up, by the praise of others it gains him, or how it gives him a sense of influence or power. Peter confronts this, saying elders must never lord it over others, or as the ESV puts it, “*not domineering over those in their charge*” (1 Peter 5:3). This is not the way of a shepherd.

Instead, elders are called to be an example. Peter is calling the elders to humility. In a subtle way, in this very passage, Peter is modeling this for us. Remember, Peter is writing this letter with the authority of an apostle. This is how he began in 1 Peter 1:1: “*Peter, an apostle...*” That comes with apostolic authority. His authority is greater than that of the elders. But as he turns to address the elders, notice his tone.

Look at 1 Peter 5:1: “*I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed.*” Coming at it like this, Peter positions himself as an equal, a peer, a fellow elder. He’s modeling the very humility he’s calling them to imitate. As the saying goes, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

Speaking of motives, Peter provides a far better one. In verse four he reminds the elders, “*When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*” In the ancient world, the crown of glory was not made of gold; it was a garland made of twigs and leaves, like a wreath that would fall apart and fade over time. Athletes and military heroes would receive a crown like this to honor their victory. This would be a familiar image for people.

Peter is contrasting the crown of glory elders will receive. It’s very similar, actually, to the inheritance he describes of all believers in 1 Peter 1:4, that which is “*imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.*” In this way Peter wants the elders to be motivated for the right reasons. The greatest conceivable reward is waiting for this honor in glory. It will not

fade, but will last forever. What exactly this honor looks like is not described in detail here. What we do know is that it does not and cannot compare with the One Who bestows it. There is a reason why in Revelation the elders cast their crowns before the Lamb.

I love the way Ed Clowney puts this. Speaking of Christ, he writes, “The crown of resurrection life is His to give—indeed, He is Himself that crown. The faithful elders who receive their crowns of blessing from the Lord will cast their crowns before the throne of Him Who wore the crown of thorns for them.”

Up to this point we’ve been focusing on Christ’s call to the elders. Now it’s time to shift our focus, along with Peter, to how we all, as God’s people, respond to the authority He’s placed over us:

⁵ In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Here’s the point. All believers are called to submit to Christ’s authority and serve each other with humility. In various points throughout this letter, Peter has touched a sensitive nerve. Multiple times he’s connected our submission to Christ with our submission to human authorities that God has placed over us. He’s talked about how this plays out in marriage, with governing authorities or other situations. Now he’s applying this same principle within the church.

I’d wager that when this category of submission crosses over into the arena of human authority, there are a lot of us who have a knee-jerk reaction, almost a recoiling in our hearts, especially when it comes to spiritual authority within the church. This is one of the hardest things for 21st century Americans to swallow. Our culture’s most precious values, independence and autonomy, are the very desires the devil appealed to back in Genesis 3. They’re still at the heart of his deceptions today and are often idols for us. In reality, there is no greater freedom than to come under Christ’s authority, submitting to Him and also to those whom He’s placed over us. How can anyone submit to Christ without submitting to those whom Christ has charged to oversee and shepherd? Peter doesn’t shy away from this. We could put this even more pointedly: If you reject this, you’re rejecting Christ’s authority as well.

For those of us today who are serving as elders, here’s a word for us as well. We will do well to remember that there was a time when we were not elders, and there will come a time again most likely when we are no longer elders. Even today, as individual elders, we submit ourselves to the plurality of elders. This means there is no exception. Every single one of us

within the body, elders included, are called to submit to Christ by submitting to the authority of the elders in the local body. This is itself submission to Christ, for His glory and our ultimate good. New Covenant Bible Church, if we were to set this aside, it would be impossible for us to flourish as God's people, as God's flock.

By the way, a quick word to the young men; I realize Peter is kind of singling you out here. It's not because the charge does not apply to other age groups, but because some things never change. I can identify with this personally as a sort of young man still myself. In particular, young men, have a predilection, a tendency to shirk authority. Whatever generation gap there is today, it was also there in the first century. So Peter is making sure that we're paying attention here because this is important. But he also doesn't linger here. He quickly moves on to place a far greater emphasis on a strong call to all believers: *"All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (1 Peter 5:5). The CSV, ESV and NIV all translate this phrase, *"Clothe yourselves with humility..."* It's a great translation, especially for how we picture this in English.

The literal meaning of that word "clothe" is to tie on or tie around. It would be a very good translation as well to say, "Tie humility around yourself." Picture the way a humble servant might pick up an apron and tie it around his waist. This is actually an image Peter saw with his own eyes—as did all the disciples—on the last night they spent with Jesus before He went to the cross. On the night of the Last Supper, this is one of the things Jesus did. Close your eyes and picture this scene in your mind. I'll read a few verses from John 13. Speaking of Jesus, it says:

⁴ He got up from supper, laid aside his outer clothing, took a towel, and tied it around himself. ⁵ Next, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel tied around him.

⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who asked him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

⁷ Jesus answered him, "What I'm doing you don't realize now, but afterward you will understand."

Peter did come to understand. This is the very basis for what he's calling all of us to do—clothe ourselves with the same kind of humility Christ modeled for His disciples in the way He served them. As He has done, so ought we to do with one another, demonstrate humility within the body of Christ.

So what has the Holy Spirit been saying to you through His Word this morning? Yes, much of what we've heard was directed toward the elders, but there is much for the church as a whole. At the center of all of this, Christ is concerned with our hearts. He's concerned with our love for Him. He's concerned with our love for our fellow sheep, which also belong to Him. So prayerfully examine your heart. How is the Lord leading you to respond to His Word now?

I would like to share a request on behalf of the elder team. Would you pray for us? This is a season right now that comes with a lot of pressure. With all of the uncertainty, strong emotions, strong and differing opinions, the elders are seeking to care for God's flock as a whole at New Covenant as we move into the next phase of reopening. The goal here is to feed and protect God's flock while preserving our witness to a watching world. It's possible that some of the decisions already made, or some of the decisions yet to come in the next phase, might not perfectly match every one of your personal convictions. So we ask you to pray for wisdom for the elders and to model humility to the rest of your fellow sheep, giving the benefit of the doubt. We are seeking to do what is best for the flock as a whole, which is not an easy task right now.

Thankfully and wonderfully, our Shepherd, our Lord Jesus, is watching over all of us. He will lead us forward. We are walking through a valley, but this time will not last. We will again rest beside still waters together, without masks or social distancing. In the meantime, His rod and His staff comfort us. His presence is with us. He prepares a feast before us, even now. In a moment Pastor Sunday will come to lead us in the feast Christ has prepared as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together.

Let's go to Him now in prayer.

Lord Jesus, You are the Good Shepherd Who laid down His life for the sheep—for us. We're so grateful to be Yours and under Your watchful care. It's a joy to submit to You, Lord Jesus. Would You calm our fears and provide for our needs; You know what they are. Help us, Lord, to tie humility around ourselves, serving and loving Your people. Thank You for the cross. Thank You for the resurrection. Thank You for the glory of resurrection life which is ours in You, Lord Jesus. And now would You feed our souls, as we celebrate Your Table together, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the Christian Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.
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