**I Peter 5: 1-4**

Today we are going to be learning about the role of elders in the church. It’s a crucial role in the health of a church body. I thought it was a bit overwhelming and yet comprehensive when one author wrote that this position “demands the wisdom of Solomon, the patience of Job, the strength of Samson, the courage of Daniel, the kingly character of David, the administrative ability of Nehemiah, to say nothing of the compassion of Hosea or the battlefield brilliance of Joshua.”

It was true in the first century, and it is still true today that hard times demand strong leaders who will rise to the challenge of that leadership.

I think it’s been interesting to see the pattern or form of Peter’s writing in this letter. . . He will begin a section by stating a truth about what the early Christians were facing, then he will present to them the hope they have in Christ, the blessings God has given them that enable them to deal with those challenges or difficulties, and then he will take it one more step to the application where he will advise these believers how to live out the actual situation where they find themselves. He says, “ok, this is happening? . . .ok, well then, in light of this, live this way . . .here are some practical ways to live that will help you get through this successfully.”

Peter is very deliberate in the way he is writing this letter, and we see that once again, in this passage, by the first word he uses in verse 1, which in the Greek is “therefore”! For some reason, many translations omit this word. Once again, Peter is going to build on his previous point…he’s just spoken to them about suffering – suffering for being a Christian, "the painful trial they were suffering", and he had encouraged them in that this suffering allowed them to “participate in the sufferings of Christ”.

And now Peter turns immediately to discuss the question of leadership because the health of the body of Christ, especially in times of trouble and difficulty and stress, is so dependent upon the strength and faithfulness of its leaders. So Peter moves from the difficulty the believers are experiencing, the suffering, to reveal God's plan, His answer about how the church should respond… specifically how the elders of the church should lead and care for the body. Peter directs this exhortation to them because he wants to be sure that these leaders fulfill their spiritual responsibility.

*“Therefore, to the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed . . . ”*

The word “elder” has its origins in the Old Testament, when, in the nation of Israel, certain men were selected on the basis of their maturity and wisdom to provide guidance for the people of God. These respected, godly men who led the nation were called elders. During the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments, the Jews were scattered far from Israel and far from the Temple. As yet, as they gathered together for worship far from their homeland, they continued to call the leaders of their synagogues “elders”.

This term was used extensively by many of the religions in the Old and New Testaments – we see many elders referred to among the Pharisees and Sadducees, but it is in Acts 20: 17, that Paul, for the first time uses this expression, “elders” to refer to leaders in the body of Christ, Christians, followers of the Way.

So, as Peter begins to address these elders, we see from the verb in this verse, “appeal” that he is not merely throwing out suggestions. He is exhorting them – He is imploring, urging, strongly encouraging the church leaders in the task before them. Peter had personally experienced the attacks and temptations of the devil and the world and he knew, first-hand, how easy it was to succumb to them. He was fully aware that, for these believers to withstand the pressures of their culture, where they would constantly face temptation to sin and to renounce their faith, it was essential that they were led by godly, mature, faithful men. This would help them endure the suffering and the persecution they were facing.

As Peter begins this address, we see his humility. Though he is an apostle and writes with apostolic authority, he humbles himself to the level of the church leaders themselves when he writes, *“. . . To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder. . .”* , Peter is bonding himself with them, lovingly expressing and emphasizing what they have in common. He is saying, “ I identify with the difficulty of the task before you. Sheep are prone to not allow you to shepherd easily. It's a tremendously difficult task. I'm talking to myself when I talk to you … we are elders together...I understand the challenge of your position.” Being approached in this manner must have been very encouraging to the leaders.

Peter also presents himself as an eyewitness to Christ's sufferings.  He was present with Jesus when He was mocked and spit on and flogged. And in the midst of that terrible suffering, he had failed Jesus by denying Him. Whether he was actually present at the crucifixion or not, the Bible doesn’t say, but either way, Jesus’ suffering was still very fresh in his mind and heart. He also, by this time, had gone through a variety of sufferings for the sake of Christ and the Gospel. So Peter was the perfect person to exhort these elders to be diligent in their responsibilities, and to embrace the work of their office, no matter how they were called to suffer for it.

And finally in verse 1, he hopes to encourage them when he reminds them that they, *“. . .also will share in the glory to be revealed."* He wants them to keep the reality of this future experience in the forefront of their minds and hearts. . . the revelation of God’s glory which will cause the times of difficulty and persecution that they are experiencing in the present to pale in comparison. Not only does God, by His grace, save us . . . But we also will be given the privilege to bask in his glory, the radiant glory of Christ. And Peter is saying, “Look forward to this real hope. Let *that* move you in your work, let *that* motivate you in your service.”

Some theologians believe that Peter here is referring to the transfiguration of Christ on the mount. . .when he and James and John had seen Christ transfigured into a shining glory, and it is this glory which will be revealed again when Jesus returns.

Others believe it refers only to the future to the glory they will experience when Christ returns, when they will be glorified with Christ. Either way, Peter is saying, “This is a great hope we have before us that we share in.”

I wonder, what would it be like to live our lives in light of the glory that will be revealed? When life is very difficult and the weight of the world seems to be on our shoulders, on our heart . . . do we intentionally look forward to that day when we will bask in God’s glory, in His greatness, in His righteousness, in His presence? Do we even allow ourselves or intentionally cause ourselves to focus on this great hope, this unbelievable experience that God is going to allow us to be a part of? We need to remember this and allow this promise to encourage us that you and I will one day, if we have trusted in Him, witness the glory of God.

Now, as we move forward, to give a bit of context to Peter’s admonitions to the elders, I want us to remember a story from the Gospel of John. After the resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. They caught a miraculous number of fish and afterwards had breakfast on the beach. After breakfast Jesus three times asked Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" "Yes, Lord," he said three times, "you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my lambs." "Take care of my sheep." "Feed my sheep."

In verse 2, Peter is now going to get to the heart of this passage, and he is going to give to those who hold office in the church this same command that he was given by Jesus. He says,  ***“****Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers. . . “*  Jesus told Peter, “Feed the sheep, and now he is calling the elders to do the same.

Notice that there are three titles or job descriptions that Peter is giving these leaders in verses 1 and 2:

* + Elders
  + Overseers
  + Shepherds

At this point in the early church, all three words referred to the same group of people in the church. Elder, bishop, here translated overseer, and pastor or shepherd, all refer to the same person. They're used interchangeably. . . here, in Acts chapter 20 and other places in the New Testament. Each term though has a bit of its own flavor. This particular term “elder” emphasizes the maturity and wisdom of the men in office, and is an official title of the office.

The term overseer emphasizes their function of leadership. The word for overseer literally means “to gaze upon something.” An elder is a man who has a broad view of the church. So, the word “overseer” implies both authority and responsibility for and over the flock. For instance, Joseph was the overseer for both Potiphar and Pharaoh. He had a view of everything that was happening in their lives and with their possessions, and was responsible for it. If there was a problem, he worked to solve it. He cared about the health and growth of everything . . .he was the overseer. And here, elders are given this same responsibility in regard to the church.

Finally, we have the terms pastor and shepherd as part of an elder / church leader’s role. The primary objective of shepherding, as we see also in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, is feeding . . .feeding the flock spiritually through teaching, of leading them to green pastures and still waters, as it says in the Psalms. Included also in this term is the idea of providing protection, of strengthening, of binding up that which was broken, and bringing back again that which was driven away.

We, in this present age, are at a disadvantage here, because, as time and history and culture would have it, most of us, if not all, know very little about sheep and shepherding and shepherds. Of course, Peter’s audience would have well known the uniqueness and quirks of sheep, as well as the various responsibilities of a shepherd. Perhaps some of you have read [A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23](http://www.amazon.com/Shepherd-Looks-Psalm-23/dp/0310291429/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1288382839&sr=1-2) by [W. Phillip Keller](http://www.amazon.com/W.-Phillip-Keller/e/B001I9OLZW/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_2?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1288382839&sr=1-2) which gives such a great picture of the essential role of a shepherd.

I wish we had time to go into the analogy of the shepherd more deeply because it really adds richness and meaning, but let me just read off some of the responsibilities that being a shepherd entails and relate it to the responsibilities of an elder.

As I just said, one of the primary roles of a shepherd is to lead the sheep to nourishing green pastures . . . Sheep won’t seek it on their own, and they’ll get lost if they try. For life, a sheep requires pure, clean water, that is not too hot, not too cold. It can’t be moving too quickly, not can it be stagnant. They need to be directed to food that has no poisons or diseases, for they won’t be discriminating about this. The shepherd needs to move them on to the next patch of healthy food or else they’ll begin to consume the dirt. **He** has to be the one to determine that they get wholesome, healthy food.

From a spiritual standpoint, the elder-pastor-shepherd is to bring the flock, the church, to the place where they feed on divine truth. He is not to seek to please, but he should primarily seek to feed. He is not to tickle their ears but to nourish their souls . . . to make sure that what is presented to that flock is the true meat of the Word of God. The elders are to guard the purity of the truth of the Gospel against error and the purity of the church against sin.

It’s the shepherd’s responsibility to keep the sheep from going astray, to keep the sheep from getting lost on their own, wandering off into some pasture that would be harmful to them or would cause them to get separated from the flock. And the shepherd has to be ever on alert for a predator, an animal that would come to harm or to kill.

In the same way, leaders in the church are to make sure there isn't someone masquerading as a true teacher to lead the flock astray. They need to be ever cognizant of attacks on their flock and be ready to defend it properly.

When individual sheep, members of the church, stray, the elders are to seek that one that is lost, watch over them, attempt to lead them in the way of the Good Shepherd. If it is possible, in humility restore them. And, if necessary, as they see deliberate sin and unbiblical practices, the elders are to confront the offender, speak honestly with them about their sin, and seek through admonishing to bring them back to Christ, back to the flock. These are a duties of the church leader.

I could go on and on relating the roles of the shepherd and how those relate to the responsibilities of an elder. Bottom line: it is a full-time job that requires a myriad of skills and a heart that is sensitive and intent to serve. The call to be a leader in the church is a high and challenging and diverse and demanding calling. . . it entails and includes so much of life and relationships and situations. It’s not to be taken lightly.

Jesus, in John 10, had referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd. There is just so much contained in that chapter about Jesus’ providence to us and his sacrifice for us. It tells how He knows each one of us individually and personally – He has a shepherd’s concern for each one of His flock. He knows our name. He searches for us out when we go astray. And we, because we know Him, can recognize His voice. Because of what He has done, as the good shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep, we have been saved from sin and guided to everlasting life. With all this in mind, we can declare with thanks and assurance and peace, “The Lord is our Shepherd; we shall not want.” Isn’t that true?

So, we’ve looked now at the various roles of an elder / overseer / shepherd.

So, who are elders to shepherd? It says in verse 2 it is, *“God’s flock that is under your care*”. . . pretty clear. . . the church. We should notice 2 things: 1) The flock is not the elder’s flock, or your or my flock; it is Jesus’ flock, the body of Christ, His church whom He purchased with His own blood, it says in Acts 2. And 2) The flock is only **under their care**. God has given the elders the responsibility to care for them for a time . . .which is, until the time when Christ returns. Elders are answerable to Another, to the Lord Jesus, and some day, they will have to give account to Him for how they tended His sheep.

You know, it seems like there are sooo many activities that the leaders of the church can get involved in. . .so many jobs and issues that can take them away from the responsibilities that God has called them to. And, as the flock, I think this is something we can help with by volunteering to do those things that would take leader’s time away from shepherding and by being aware not to cause extra work or dissention or unhelpful complaining which might take precious time away from the work to which God has called our leaders.

Now Peter moves from the functions of an elder to the attitudes required. The first characteristic he says is necessary for service in this capacity is willingness. Peter uses contrasting words in verse 2 to emphasize the point: He tells them to be a shepherd*"not because you must, but because you are willing."*

A church that is under attack cannot afford to have elders who don't really want to serve in office. God wants men who want to be shepherds, and are doing so because they feel that God has called them to it. Peter is saying that any other motive disqualifies a person from this high office! Sheep can be very stubborn and wayward and unappreciative and make the job of the shepherd challenging sometimes. The task of being an elder is for one who has courage and patience and perseverance, and desire to do the work**,** motivated by the Holy Spirit and the call of God. If he doesn’t have this heart, the position will prove arduous and burdensome and he won’t be able to carry out his task, as God desires him to.

You know I just love the way that some of the early theologians comment on Scripture. John Gill, an English Baptist pastor in the early 1700s, explained this requirement beautifully when he said that elders are to serve: “For the sake of the honour and glory of God. This should be done with all a man's heart and soul, and should spring from pure love to Christ, for no man is fit to feed Christ's lambs and sheep but those who sincerely love him. . . “ And he continues, “He serves from a cordial and affectionate concern for the good of souls; and from a hearty desire and delight in the work itself. Otherwise all he does will be as a task and burden. He will do it grudgingly, and with negligence, and will murmur under it, at least secretly.”

The second characteristic that is required of an elder is that he be  “. ***. . not greedy for money, but eager to serve.”*** At that time, just like today, the elders controlled the purse strings of the church. Peter is making it clear that no one is to serve for the purpose of gaining money. They are not to make money off the ministry or try to make ministry profitable. That must never, never be a motive. Instead, Peter calls the elder to do his work with eagerness, enthusiasm, and with zeal for the Lord’s service. In other words, elders should be eager for service, rather than eager for money.

Verse 3 contains one final instruction regarding the heart and behavior of a church leader… He is to shepherd the flock of God by, *“… not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”*

Here we have the opposite of the first problem. In that case, the elder serves because he has to and does his job half-heartedly. In this case, the elder abuses his power and rules the church like a tyrant. The word "lording" is a strong word. It means literally to dominate someone or to completely domineer a situation. It is an autocratical, oppressive kind of leadership, leadership by intimidation. Fortunately, we don’t have anyone here at Grace who is like that – what a mess that would make and how opposite of God’s desire for a leader!

We saw Jesus specifically warred against this kind of leadership. When James and John were jockeying for places of power, an argument broke out about whom among them was the greatest. And Jesus said to them, *". . .the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves."*

Jesus insisted that the disciples adopt a servant leadership approach. Rather than ruling dictatorially, as Peter exhorts them here, the elders are to lead *by example*. Following Jesus' example, they are to serve the people.

Imagine Jesus washing Peter's feet as an act of humility and you have the idea of what he’s talking about here. Peter is echoing to these elders Jesus' own words on that occasion when he said,*"You also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you"*

A good elder doesn’t demand leadership; rather, by the quality of his life, he commands it. This type of person is easy to follow. His life backs up what he says. He approaches leadership, not with authoritarian bluster, but with humility and a heart of servanthood. He is an example to the flock.

It occurred to me that Peter is calling these elders to a very interesting combination of requirements. On the one hand they are to be overseers, to get the scope over the whole church, to see the big picture of the temperature, the heart, the health and the practical workings of the church. On the other hand, leaders are to get so into the flock and be so involved in peoples’ lives personally that they can become a pattern they can follow. So it is not just leadership from on high, it is leadership from within. That's the challenging balance the elders are to find.

As we come to the end of this passage, notice that it began with Christ and now, it ends with Christ. It began with Christ's sufferings. It ends with Christ's glory. Verse 4 says that, *“. . . when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”* Once again, Peter is reminding the elders that this job of shepherding has been on a commission basis… the flock is not theirs; they have only been looking after the sheep for someone else – namely, the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter uses this term, “Chief Shepherd”, to remind his fellow elders that Christ is the shepherd over all other shepherds, including the elders.

Spiritual leaders are often unappreciated. The world does not notice their work. And even in the church, we often overlook those who labor for Christ. Sometimes they come under attack. Sometimes the sheep are unbelievably stubborn and demanding and judgmental. But despite the huge task ahead, leaders are called to perform the duties of their office not the love of money, not for the love of power. But love for the Chief Shepherd who someday will return and ask, "Did you feed my sheep? Did you guard them? Did you seek out the lost sheep? Did you stand watch against the wolves? Did you love my flock?"

Well, Peter finishes with a great encouragement. . . . that with this great responsibility comes much greater reward. . . they will *“ receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”*

To those in church office who have done what they are supposed to (be shepherds and overseers) and who have done it the way they are supposed to (willingly, with eagerness to serve, by being examples to the flock), God not only promises eternal life to them, but He promises an extra reward; they will receive this wonderful promise of a crown of glory that will never fade away.

God has seen it all; He has seen their work of faith, their labor of love, their commitment, and humility. And, when Jesus returns at His Second Coming, though their labor hasn’t been perfect, they will receive, by God’s generous grace, the unfading crown of eternal glory. This won’t be a crown like one which was given to the victor of sporting events at the time which was made of diverse plants like the wild olive, the pine tree and of parsley. But this will be a crown of glory - a glorious crown is the actual translation - that will never fade but will shine forever in its full luster. And ultimately, God will again be glorified because, as it says in Revelation 4, these crowns of glory will be cast the foot of His throne. It’s going to be amazing, isn’t it?

So, Peter is saying, Be Encouraged… Your labors on earth will never be forgotten. They’re not overlooked. They are not in vain.

So what can we glean from this passage? What can we learn? What is God calling us to, in response to these verses?

Well, one of the first things that came to my mind was when Peter says, “Be examples to the flock.” This principle applies not just to elders – I know that this passage is addressing elders specifically – but really this principal of being an example pertains to anyone who serves the Lord. Nothing will ever affect people more than your own example. And the guidelines for being an example in service – being willing, being eager, not being greedy, being gracious, not grumbling or being too controlling in your work are great ones for anyone to follow.

This made me think about the godly examples I’ve been so fortunate to have in my life . . .those, who, because of their service, their love for God, their dedication, have changed my life and others for eternity. I was thinking about my professors at Biola, the people I worked with in Germany with Campus Crusade, and all the Sunday School teachers I had during my growing-up years and what wonderful examples they were to me, what encouragement they gave me and the other kids, their eagerness that we grow in God, their creativity and sacrifice of their time. Frankly, as I look back, I don’t remember any specific Sunday morning lesson that I was taught (Sorry, Janet McAleer!), but I definitely remember your and others’ love and faithfulness. I remember thinking about how cool you were, how much I truly felt cared for, spiritually and otherwise by you. You were a shepherd . . . a wonderful example - to me and so many others – I so clearly remember that you just wanted all of us to love God and to know Him. And what I believe we can learn here is that the strength of the church and the growth of individuals depends on good leaders, and we each have a part to play in that. We each can be an example, no matter where we serve in the church.

And the other main directive I came away from this with is that we need to pray for our leaders. Pray for our elders. Pray for those who teach. Pray for the High school, Jr. High and Sunday school teachers. Pray for each of the staff members . . . each person who leads this church.

Often, leaders in the church and their families live under incredible pressures. Their lives are played out in a fishbowl, not with just our church body, but with the community watching how they live their lives. They are expected to have ideal families, to be perfect people, to always be available, to never be down and to have all the answers, while keeping their own lives stable and moving forward. Those are unrealistic expectations to place on anyone, yet most of us are disappointed when a pastor becomes overwhelmed, seems depressed, makes a bad decision, doesn’t show up for an event, lets us down or completely burns out.

Let’s ask God to give us grace, and understanding, to see their needs, to reach out in support. And let’s come before God and ask Him to give them the wisdom and the courage, the willingness and humility, the strength and the perseverance to serve Him as Peter calls out in this passage.

I have listed on the PP the names of the elders of this church, and would ask you to pick one or two for whom you will pray this week. And perhaps even commit to praying for one each day of the week.

These men have a important and vital calling. . . .they have a huge responsibility. And, as they lead, so goes the church and they need our prayers, our support and encouragement.