

Encouragement for Elders

- 1 Peter 5:1-4
- Peter starts the final part of his letter with encouragement for the elders who were shepherding the churches to whom he is writing. We will look at that this morning. He follows that encouragement with a call to the churches to walk in humility toward one another, standing with the elders and trusting in God. That is next week, Lord willing. And finally Peter calls the churches to bold resistance to the devil and his schemes. Let's look at today's encouragement under three main points: What elders are and do, how elders serve, and why elders serve.
- **What elders are and do (verses 1-3)**
- Notice the first word Peter starts with is "so." It is another "look back" word, like therefore or likewise. Peter witnessed Christ's suffering and shares in future glory. See that? That reminds us of what he said in 4:13, that we looked at last week. "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Peter doesn't come from above to speak to these men but he comes alongside them. He "exhorts" the elders calling them alongside to encourage them. Why? Because, Peter says, *I am a fellow elder. As an apostle, I saw the suffering of Christ, and as an elder, I am charged with a precious and important task, just as you are.* This is an appeal, an encouragement that is intended to produce a particular effect. Peter's desire, more than anything, is that the elect exiles he is writing to will not give in or give up but will stand firm in the faith and endure to the end. And Peter knows that when it comes to the health and flourishing of any church, much depends on the faithfulness of the elders. And he knows that ALL depends on the grace of our Lord Jesus helping the elders and the saints walk in love and unity.
- What are elders? Peter uses three different words to describe this calling that are important for us to understand. The first word is presbuteros, and it can simply mean older, or mature. The first mention of the apostles being the first presbytery, the first council of elders, is in Acts 11:29-30. The disciples in Antioch heard from a prophet named Agabus that there would be a great famine everywhere, so they decided to "send relief to the brothers living in Judea...sending it to the *elders* by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." Elders came to mean much more than just older or mature. In 1 Timothy 5:17, we see that same word describing elders as those who lead or rule, literally, those who "stand before." Paul wrote, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Elders lead but they also feed the church, laboring as some do in preaching and teaching, a ministry that is central to the work of the shepherd just as it was to the work of Christ our Shepherd. And the elders do this work as a team, a council of elders. Not one man but a plurality. In Acts 14:23, we see that Paul and Barnabas came back to the cities where they had planted churches a year earlier. "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The churches planted by the Apostle Paul each had a plurality of elders to lead them.
- The second word Peter uses to describe these men is in verse 2, where he tells the elders to "shepherd the flock." "Poimaino." It is a word that was used to refer to those who tended sheep by guiding, guarding, leading, feeding, and protecting them. Paul used a form of this word in Ephesians 4 when he said that Christ gave to the church "the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds (or pastors, "poimen") and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry." Elders are mature leaders. They are also shepherd/pastors. Paul told the elders from Ephesus, "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos), to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)
- The third word Peter uses to describe elders is in verse 2, translated "oversight." "Episkopeo" is the verb form of a noun that Paul uses in his greeting to the church in Philippi: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers (episkopos) and deacons." (Philippians 1:1). The elders were overseers, and here we see Paul identifying the two offices of the New Testament church: elders

and deacons. The elders lead and feed and care for and exercise oversight for the sake of the spiritual health of the body. The deacons serve, also for the well-being of the body! That leads us to...

- **How elders serve (verses 2-3)**

- When Jesus restored Peter after he had denied the Lord three times, the Lord told Peter, “Feed my lambs...tend my sheep...feed my sheep.” (John 21) Peter is remembering perhaps that Jesus had called him to be a shepherd to the sheep that belonged to the Lord, by taking care of them and feeding them. Look at what Peter says to the elders here.
- First, they serve by taking care of the ones whom God has given them. Peter said, “shepherd the flock that is among you.” Like any honest shepherd, elders don’t go out and try to rustle sheep from other pastures. They tend to the sheep God sends to their flock. This is an argument for church membership, which requires a decision and a commitment by a person or family to put themselves under the leadership of the elders in a local church. It is also an argument for participation in home groups. Elders cannot as easily exercise oversight with a moving target or a missing member. It is good for the members to be in close fellowship with smaller groups every week, and it is good for the elders to have that close-up ministry with them.
- Second, elders serve willingly, not under compulsion, not for shameful gain, but eagerly. Elders do not serve because someone, their wives, or their best friend, told them they should be an elder. Nor do they serve for money, even if one or more of them are paid. They serve willingly, even eagerly, as God would have them do. This seems hard for us to understand because we are not being persecuted as believers with execution or even imprisonment. But being set apart in Peter’s day as an elder, and today in places where conversion to Christ is illegal or where baptism can bring a death sentence, brings a whole different set of challenges. But even here, where we are relatively safe, any sincere shepherd of Christ’s flock will feel the weight of that responsibility. And leans into it eagerly.
- Third, elders serve not by domineering over the flock but as examples to the flock. Edmund Clowney writes, “Elder-shepherds are not cowboys, driving their flocks like cattle. They lead them as a shepherd would, walking on ahead.” Elders must be men who, and we elders tremble at this, can say as Paul did, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:1) Examples that can be seen, not just read about in Christian history books. And notice Peter again says the elders are to take care of those “in (their) charge.” Verse 3. The word used there was “lot,” with the reference being a practice of the Jews and the Romans to determine choice. The lots (could have been stones or some other object) of different parties were marked with their emblem and all were put into a vessel. It was shaken violently and then turned upside down. The “lot” that came out first indicated the man or party chosen for the occasion. What Peter seems to say here is that elders cannot choose their flock. God chooses their flock for them and their job is to tend to and feed the ones he gives. It is sad that the model we most often see in the U.S. is that of solo pastors without elders choosing to reject their lot after two or three years and move to one they think they will like better. Some, perhaps, are looking for their reward here on earth, but that’s not where the greatest reward comes. That leads us to...

- **Why elders serve (verse 4)**

- “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” There’s really nothing more that needs to be said. But there *is* more I can say, so I will.
- First, Peter reminds the first century church and our 21st century church that Jesus is coming again. The chief Shepherd, who is our example, is also our hope. The one Hebrews calls “the great shepherd of the sheep” is coming again. (Hebrews 13:20) On that day, elders everywhere will rejoice with a great voice because their work is done. There is no need for shepherds when the chief shepherd is here! There will be great rejoicing then, but we will also have to give an account. The writer of Hebrews tells us this in a word of encouragement to the flock: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, *as those who will have to give an account*. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Hebrews 13:17)

- Second, when the chief Shepherd appears, he will give “the unfading crown of glory” to faithful elders. I cannot even imagine what that is like, but to receive anything from the Lord Jesus is all of grace, and anything we elders have done or will do is all of grace. There is no boasting. As Paul said, “By the grace of God, I am what I am.”
- Third, I know what any of us will do with a crown, should the Lord see fit to give us one. John tells us in Revelation: “...the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.” How could we wear a crown when we stand before the One who wore the crown of thorns for us?
- Prayer
- Communion
- Greet One Another