

“The Responsibilities of Elders” Psalm 23 Shane Hatfield 8/21/22

This morning we’re going to look at Psalm 23, the responsibilities of the elders. So, please read along with me.

**1** The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

**2** He makes me lie down in green pastures.

He leads me beside still waters.

**3** He restores my soul.

He leads me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

**4** Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

**5** You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

**6** Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord

Forever.

All men are like grass and their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers, and the flowers fade, but not the word of the Lord. It stands forever.

As most of you know, I grew up on a farm in Coweta, and so, when you grow up on a farm, there's always work to do. There's not really an option. One of my earliest memories of work was waking up on a Saturday morning and my mom getting me ready to go hay cattle with my grandpa. I put on the jeans, the jacket, the boots, the gloves, all that stuff, I wait by the door as grandpa comes to pick me up in his work truck. We went to the barn, we loaded the hay bales in the barn, I'm sure I probably tried to lift them but couldn't, and I'm sure my grandpa did all the lifting and I just kind of put my hands on the bale. Then we went to the gas station to pick up snacks: pop and candy. Because you know, you can't work without pop and candy, right?

Then we went to the pasture, and he took me and put me in the back end of the truck and he clipped the bailing wire off the hay bales and then we kicked the hay around in the back end of the truck and then he let down the tailgate. What he would do is he would drive the field and he would honk the horn. As he honked the horn, the cattle would come to eat, and I would kick the hay out of the back end of the truck so the cattle could feed on the hay. We did that all the way through the fields until the hay was gone and then we'd stop and eat our snacks together. After that, we'd make a pass around the field to check the fence and make sure the fence isn't down so the cattle can't get out, because they're always doing that sort of thing, right? Then at the end, we scanned the perimeter and then came back to the gate where we would shut the gate and lock it and then leave. In the course of that process, we were caring for our cattle, right? I thought this was awesome! It was a great time for me to be with my grandpa, to learn how to work, and to get some peanut m&ms and coke. What I didn't know at the time, what my grandpa probably didn't know, was that he was preparing me to be a sheep in God's flock, and to be a shepherd of God's people. Everything that we did in that little job was similar to what I do as a pastor, and what we do as sheep in God's flock.

You see, cattle ranchers, and shepherds or elders, are responsible for knowing, feeding, leading, and protecting their animals. This morning, as we look at the responsibilities of elders, what I want you to see is that an elder knows his sheep, feeds his sheep, leads his sheep, and protects his sheep. Four points, I know, it's okay, I'll shorten them. An elder knows, leads, feeds, and protects his sheep. Now, that doesn't seem so hard, but it *is* because those things all require relationships. We are fundamentally relational beings, because we are created by a God who is relational. So, for us to be fully formed humans, we have to live in relationship. We have to live in community. But relationships are hard, because sin causes shame and guilt and fear and it makes building those relationships and maintaining those relationships really, really hard. So, as we look at the responsibilities of the elders, what I want you to see is that these responsibilities require a growing, intimate, deep relationship with our shepherd, Jesus, and with each other. Kids, you can listen for a story about a group of sheep who followed the wrong leader and how that turned out, okay?

So, let's look at these responsibilities of the elders. The first thing we see is that the shepherd knows his sheep! The elder knows his sheep. David says in Psalm 23, "The Lord is my shepherd." This is a personal relationship. He doesn't say He's a shepherd, or *the* shepherd, he says, He is *my* shepherd. David was a shepherd and he knew his sheep. He knew that the Lord was his shepherd, that he knew the Lord, and the Lord knew him. There's

a personal relationship there. When Jesus came to earth, He said the same thing. In John 10:14-15 He said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep." The relationship between the shepherds and the sheep starts with the relationship with God. It starts with having the Lord as your shepherd. That's the first thing I want to ask you: is the Lord your shepherd? Do you have a deep, intimate, personal knowledge with the Lord of the universe who made you and takes care of you? That's where this relationship between the elders and the congregation begins. The elders proclaim Jesus as the good shepherd and God uses that proclamation to draw His people to Him. His sheep hear His voice and they respond in faith. The elders receive them in faith into local congregations. When we take members of our church, you make a profession of faith, you say, "The Lord is my shepherd," amongst a lot of other things. The elders take them into the flock, and then the elders take responsibility for caring for those sheep. These sheep are God's valuable inheritance that has been entrusted to us. And so, the elders seek to know these sheep intimately. We want to know names and backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses, desires, sin, suffering, celebration, all those things. We want to know you as the Lord knows you. It's in that knowing that we can actually feed you.

Tyler Gray is here. He's one of our elders, but he's on sabbatical right now, he just had a fourth kid. Fifth? See, I can't even keep up with them! I lost count! Tyler had his fifth sheep that he added to his flock, so he took a sabbatical. He's resting. But Tyler told me this story, he said at one point he went down to Florida and he got to worship in R.C. Sproul's church. If you don't know who R.C. Sproul is, he's a theologian, he's a pastor, he's kind of a big deal in reformed and Presbyterian circles. So, Tyler was excited to get to worship at his church and he said the worship was amazing, it was awesome, but he said, the most impressive thing about the whole morning was that after R.C. Sproul preached, he went to the back of the sanctuary to greet everybody as they left. As they walked out, hundreds and hundreds of people, he knew the names of every single person in his congregation. He knew them. He knew his sheep. It was this knowing that led him to feed the sheep the word of God.

That's the second thing that we see that the shepherd does. The shepherd feeds his sheep. Psalm 23 says, "He makes me lay down in green pastures," that adjective green is important, because a green pasture is a good pasture to feed in. You wouldn't lead a sheep to a brown pasture if you were trying to feed him, you're going to lead him to a green pasture. We all need food, right? From the moment we wake up we begin to think about food! At least the Hatfields do. Feeding is fundamental to living physically and growing! Well it's also fundamental to living spiritually, and to growing spiritually. God wants to provide His people with the word that they need to grow spiritually, and He wants His shepherds to provide His people with the word. He even rebuked and judged the shepherds of Israel because they weren't feeding the sheep! Then as Charlie read in the call to worship, God promised that He would feed His sheep. When Jesus came, Jesus talked about feeding on the word of God, and then when He sent His disciples out, He sent them out to minister to the lost sheep of Israel and what did He tell Peter to do? "Feed my sheep." Elders are people that feed on the word of God and then feed God's people the word. So, elders in our church oversee the teaching ministry of the church, the preaching, teaching, Christian education, and small

groups! Through that whole thing they try to give the sheep a well-balanced diet, everything they need from the word of God. They may also feed the flock themselves!

So, I'm a teaching elder so I kind of lead in this area, but our ruling elders also participate in leading small groups, leading Bible studies, doing one on one discipleship. Sometimes they teach and preach! I believe Tyler has preached a few times. So, when you're looking for an elder, when you're looking for a shepherd, you have to say, 'Does this man feed on the word of God? Can He feed me the word of God? Is he someone I would go to when I had a theological question? Is it someone I would go to if I needed spiritual nourishment, or I needed counseling?' We want elders that know us and can feed us personally and intimately. I've seen this in my life, and it's been of huge benefit to me.

One point that really sticks out, when I was in seminary, seminary is an overwhelming time for people who are training to be pastors. You're taking classes, you're working full-time, you're trying to be a faithful Christian, a faithful husband, a faithful friend, all these things, you've just got a mountain of things, responsibilities that are placed on you, and it can be overwhelming. I remember one day I was walking and talking with my pastor and I was just kind of pouring my heart out about all the things I was struggling with, and how hard it was, and how I really wanted to be the best that I could be in all these different areas. My pastor knew me, he knew my struggle with ambition and pride and self-sufficiency, and he knew I was a very results-oriented person, and he looked at me and he said, 'Shane, you cannot get an A in everything. Pick the most important things.' He knew me! He knew what I needed to hear from the word, and he fed me what I needed to hear from the word.

A shepherd knows his sheep, a shepherd feeds his sheep, and then thirdly, a shepherd leads his sheep. Psalm 23 says in verses 2-3: "He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." All people want and need direction. We need purpose. We need goals. We need to know where we're going in life. God's people were no different! God led them, right? He led His people out of Egypt and into the promised land. Jesus called His sheep to follow Him! He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life!" He said that He leads to the Father. As we follow Jesus, He gives us purpose and meaning in our lives. Elders lead out of a desire to see the congregation follow Jesus. Like Paul says, 'Follow me, as I follow Christ.' Elders are spiritual leaders over the people who are saying, 'Hey, follow me as I am following Jesus.' So, the elders of our church lead the sheep thoughtfully and prayerfully. We steward the vision, mission, purpose, and policies of the church that we think God would have. It's not our church, it's His church. It's not our goal, it's His goal. So, we shepherd the people God brings as we proclaim the gospel. The general activities of the church are laid out in the Bible, but the particulars are left to the wisdom of the elders and the flock. The elders shepherd the flock. They lead them.

Elders also lead with their godly character. Next week we're going to spend a whole sermon talking about the godly character requirements that it takes to be an elder so I'm not going to go in depth there, but I will say that they lead by example in worshiping, giving, serving, and in building community in the church. So, when you're looking for an elder or a

spiritual leader, ask yourself, 'Does this person follow Christ? Does He follow Jesus? Is it clear that Jesus is His shepherd? Can I follow Him as He follows Jesus?' What's that going to do is, that's going to put the elders in a position where they have to lead in some challenging and dirty places, because that's where Jesus leads us.

I heard a story this week about a group of elders in a church, and they wanted to serve a local inner city school. They went to the principal and they said, 'We want to serve your school! We want to help out.' She said, 'Okay, that's great! Come on over and start visiting the school and we'll see what you guys can do.' So, they went for about three weeks and they observed what was going on and after about three weeks the elders came to the principal and said, 'We really want to do something! We want to get our hands dirty, how can we help you?' The principal said, 'Well, here's the thing about our school, we're all female. There are no males on staff. We have all these boy students and every day they have to go to the bathroom and we can't take them because we're females. So, they go to the bathrooms by themselves and they foul up the bathroom.' I don't know if you've ever seen a little boy's or a men's restroom but they're disgusting. Imagine the end of a day after a bunch of little boys use the bathroom by themselves, and it's filthy! So, the principal said, 'Would you be willing to take these boys to the restroom and to show them how to use the restroom?' So, for three weeks these elders had to go there with the boys into this dirty, filthy place, and show them how to use the restroom. After three weeks, they went back to the principal and they said, 'Now, can we do something for your school?' And they had earned the right to serve that school, and the principal said, 'Sure. You can lead Bible studies and you can do service projects and whatever else you want to do.' You see, Jesus doesn't just lead us into the clean places. He leads us into the dirty places. Elders are people who are willing to go and serve in the dirty places, and sheep are willing to follow them into those places.

The shepherds know the sheep, they feed the sheep, they lead the sheep, and then lastly, the elders protect the sheep. Psalm 23:4: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." Safety is important in everything we do in life, right? Car safety, household safety, schools, roads, neighborhoods, we want everything to be safe. It's especially important for sheep. I don't know if you knew this, but sheep are really weak animals and they're not the most intelligent, okay? They only have teeth in their bottom jaw, not on their top, so that means the worst they can do to protect themselves is to give you a mean pinch. If they have the wrong leader, they will follow him into destruction!

I read a story this week about some sheep in Turkey, and there was one sheep who wandered off a cliff and fell to his demise. Well, the other sheep began to follow him, so the next sheep fell, and the next sheep fell, and the next sheep fell, and in the end, 1500 sheep fell off this cliff. Several of them died because of it, but several lived because the mountain got so high that the fall was cushioned when the later sheep fell off the cliff. Sheep need leaders who can protect them. Human sheep need good leaders, and the Bible tells us here in this passage that God is the source of safety for His flock. He is the one who walks through the valley of the shadow of death. He protects them. He comforts them. When Jesus came to earth and He said, "I am the good shepherd," He said, 'I am the one who will protect them. No

one can snatch them out of my hand.' He sent His disciples out to protect the flock of God. When Paul established elders over the church in Ephesus, he commanded them to protect the flock, to care for them, to shepherd them, even at the cost of their own lives. And so, elders are to protect the flock.

How do they do that? They do that by warning them of false sheep who will distort the truth. Not everyone who uses the Bible does so for legitimate, godly reasons. They will distort the truth and twist the truth to serve themselves, oftentimes for greedy gain. Elders are to protect the sheep from that. They are also to protect them from the cultural wolves of materialism, sensuality, pluralism, relativism, all of the isms! And then, just all of the sinful temptations in our own hearts. The elders are here to help the sheep keep their lives and their doctrine pure. We want our elders to be in regular contact with the sheep. So, all of our church, every member of our church, is in a shepherding group and every elder has a shepherding group that he's responsible for checking up on every 4-6 weeks to make sure that the sheep have everything they need, that he knows them, that he cares for them, and so that he can protect them well. So, we need more and more elders to serve in that role because that requires real, intimate personal relationships. That's what the elders do, that's what shepherds do, they know the sheep, feed the sheep, lead the sheep, and protect the sheep.

That is a challenge. It is a challenge for the shepherds, and it's a challenge for the sheep. But it is a joy, and it is a privilege. You get to share the gospel with people. You get to watch them make professions of faith. You get to see the spiritual fruit develop in their lives. You get to walk side by side with them through graduations, promotions, marriages, births, new friendships, all of these wonderful, momentous life stages. You also get the privilege of walking with them through pain and suffering. Not long ago I got an urgent phone call from one of my former students, and this student called me and the unthinkable had happened, he found out that his spouse had cheated on him. He said, 'Shane, what do I do?' I said, 'You need to call your elders, now, because you can't do this alone and I can't help you from Tulsa. You need your elders.' So, he called his elders and they came over, a teaching elder and a ruling elder came over. They sat down with him, they walked him through how to confront his spouse, and they did that, and they cared for both of them, and they applied the medicine of the gospel to both of them in that situation, and then they walked step by step with them through the challenging days ahead. They put together a care team to minister to them, they paid for counseling, they connected them to addiction recovery programs, they instituted church discipline, they committed themselves to shepherding these sheep through the darkest days. Slowly, over time, they began to heal. God began to use that process to restore their relationship with God, and their relationship to each other. Their marriage was healed, and it was saved.

It took a relationship, an intimate relationship where there was knowing, feeding, leading, and protection that could take place. We know that sin and suffering are going to happen in our lives. We know that. We know that. So here at our church, we're not going to pretend like it's not going to happen. We know there are going to be wonderful, awesome, glorious things in life, we also know that there's going to be sin and suffering. The sheep and the shepherds

commit to walking through those two things together in relationship. That's beautiful, isn't it? But it's also hard, and it's also scary. Remember what we talked about earlier? Relationships are hard to grow. They're hard to maintain. Sin destroys them! We're all kind of like my kids when we first moved into our new neighborhood. We moved into the new neighborhood. They want to make friends. They're talking about how we want to have these neighborhood friends that we can go out and play with, and I said, 'Well great! There's a family of kids that lives right across the street. Go talk to them! Go initiate a relationship with them!' 'No, no! We can't do that!' We're all like that. Deep down inside we want these intimate, deep, personal relationships. In the church, and outside the church, but we're so afraid of the challenges of initiating those relationships. We need someone to draw us out. We need someone to change our hearts. We need someone to heal us, and that's what Jesus does in the gospel.

Jesus came to earth as our Chief Shepherd. He lived in heaven with the Father and the Spirit in perfect union, in perfect joy. And yet, He came down from heaven to become a sheep, to live a dependent, weak relationship with His Father on earth. He gave up perfect knowledge to be a limited being here on earth. He gave up that intimate knowledge of being with the face of God to be here! He fed on God's word like one of God's sheep. He let God lead Him. He let God protect Him. Where did that lead Him to? It led Him all the way to the cross. On the cross He died a sacrificial death. The Chief Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, became a sacrificial sheep, why? Because all we like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and God had to have someone to pay for that sin. So, God, Himself, came down and paid it for us. If you're a sheep who has wandered, what we offer you today is the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep because He loves them. He rose from the grave so He could protect them and care for them, and when you see the kindness and compassion of the Shepherd, that's what draws you out.

I heard a story this week about Captain Swinson who was in Afghanistan on September 8, 2009. There were US and Afghan troops who were going out to meet with a group of Afghan elders, and when they showed up, the Taliban was there and there was a surprise attack on all of these soldiers. They had to go in and they had to rescue these soldiers. There were five Americans and ten Afghans who were lost in the fight. Captain William Swinson was there, and you can see in the video of the situation, there is a MedVac helicopter that flies in, there's fire and fighting going all around, and Captain Swinson made several trips into the fire and into the fight to rescue his soldiers. On the video you see, he goes into the fight, he grabs one of the soldiers, he brings him into the MedVac, he puts him there, and then in a moment of incredible compassion and kindness, he leans over and kisses him on the head, and goes back to the battle. He sacrificed his own life for his sheep that he loved. Jesus sacrificed his own life for you, for me, so that we could be His sheep, and so that we could be His shepherds. The more you see how much Jesus loved you, and how much He sacrificed to bring you into that relationship, the more you will be willing to sacrifice your own needs, your own wants, your own desires, your own independence, to live in relationship with each other, to live in relationship with your elders, and to be the kind of elder that can actually do the kind of things that we just talked about. You have to have Jesus as your Good Shepherd. So, let's go to the Lord and pray that we would see Him as our Good Shepherd, together.