

1PETER 5:1-4 CBC 23.8.2020

Last time we saw Peter telling us to expect to suffer as Christians, and today he calls on church leaders to care for the suffering people of God. Verse 1 actually begins in Greek with “Therefore ...”, so what follows is the application of 4:19. This is how leaders “continue to do good” - they show the same kind of servant leadership Jesus did.

Read 1Peter 5:1-4 ...

v1: “To the elders” – the leaders of local churches. The New Testament uses various terms for them: overseers (bishops), pastors, elders – the terms are interchangeable. Not necessarily very old people – but they’re meant to be appointed from among the more mature Christians, able to shepherd others and lead by example. And in the New Testament they’re usually “elders” in the plural – sharing the responsibilities of leadership and also guarding against power-hungry individuals.

But Peter expects the whole church to hear this teaching, not just the Oversight Team. We all have a responsibility for the quality of leadership in our church. This is the leadership we need and for which we are to pray, and which we are to encourage. And many more besides the elders have been entrusted with some degree of spiritual care of others, and the principles outlined here apply right down the line.

But it’s likely that in the context of persecution, the elders were facing extra pressures and so Peter addresses them directly. And though Peter is an apostle, he doesn’t talk down to them but comes alongside to encourage: “*I appeal as a fellow-elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings ...*” – Not just “I saw Him suffer” but “I’m bearing witness to Him in my own life by sharing in the way of the cross.” Peter lets these nervous leaders know that he understands the pressure they’re under.

That’s important. It would be easy for elders to say, “What do you really know of what we’re going through?” But Peter is in the trenches with us. If you’re a leader, Peter isn’t asking you to do anything he himself is not doing.

And he knows what it is to fail – everybody knew about Peter denying his Lord under pressure. But he grew following the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And now he knows that one day (v.1) he’ll “*share in the glory to be revealed.*” And so will we! The whole course of your life depends on whether you really believe in that glory. That’s what will keep you going when leadership is costly.

1. THE ELDERS’ WORK

v.2: “*be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care*” – The word “*shepherd*” explains the task of the elders: they are pastors. They care for the church as a shepherd cares for his sheep, and it’s an awesome calling, because they are under-shepherds to Jesus Himself who is the Chief Shepherd (v.4).

The Bible often describes God as a shepherd and His people as His sheep. It’s a word-picture that emphasises our vulnerability but also God’s wise and compassionate care for us. And elders are meant to express this care for God’s people. Quite a job! Think of Psalm 23 and other biblical passages that depict God as our Shepherd: He provides for His people, feeds them, leads them, protects them from enemies, searches for any who are lost, nurses the injured back to health – and Peter says to the elders, “*Be like that!*”

Or think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd (John 10): He leads out His flock and feeds them; He knows them by name; He protects them from wolves; He's willing to lay down His life for them. The sheep would want to follow that kind of shepherd. And Peter says to the elders, "*Be like Jesus!*"

I'm sure Peter remembered Jesus' commission: "Feed my sheep!" - and His warning of the cost (John 21:15-19). Now Peter calls the elders to a similar ministry. We have to feed the flock with the word of God. Our calling is neither to be witty or novel (God's people are easily led astray by these things). What pastors and elders really need to do is give you Jesus in His word. That's their primary responsibility.

But elders also have to protect the flock by maintaining the purity of the gospel against false teaching. Peter spends an entire chapter of his next letter warning about the dangers of false teachers entering the church and trying to teach a different message and an immoral lifestyle. So elders need to stand up for what is true, protecting people. The church today is not in a safe enclosure (v.8). Being a shepherd of God's flock means being the front-line of defence for the church. And that can be dangerous! These elders need our prayers!

And especially because it's not *their* flock but "*GOD'S flock*" (v.2). What a responsibility when we remember how precious they are to Him – He purchased them with His own blood. So watch over them carefully. Give the sheep personal attention when necessary. Some pastors today seem interested only in the crowds; they have no time for individuals. Jesus preached to great crowds, but gave time to ordinary people who needed His help.

In the 17th century, Richard Baxter wrote: "Let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for these souls, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood, and are they not worth thy labour? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost; and wilt thou not go to the next door, or street, or village, to seek them?'" (*The Reformed Pastor*, p.136).

Shepherds are accountable to Christ. One of the ways to prevent abuse is to follow a shepherd who clearly knows he's under authority. In fact, what Peter writes next is a kind of safeguarding policy:

2. THE WAY THE ELDERS ARE TO DO THEIR WORK

Peter describes the kind of leaders we can trust, using three pairs of contrasts:

- **v.2: serving "not because you must, but because you are willing"** – Not because it's your job and you have to do it, but because you've gladly responded to the call of God. Remember that in countries where conversion to Christ is illegal and baptism may cost you your life, being an elder carries a high risk. Even in the comfortable west, we may be unwilling to bear the responsibility, or to sacrifice the time and energy. Where are the people who are willing to step up to the plate?

Perhaps you're a leader and you wish you'd never taken on the responsibility – you'd quit if it weren't for the expectation of others. I'm sure I'm not the only one who has felt like that! Well, a time may come when God calls you to something else. But meanwhile we're to remind ourselves that our motivation isn't wages or the approval of others, but a longing in our heart at the deepest level to be with Jesus where He's called us. And we should affirm people who are already shepherding without the need for a title – who willingly love and care for God's flock.

- **v.2: “Not pursuing dishonest (“shameful”) gain, but eager to serve”** – Peter had to say this long before the medieval church, and long before tele-evangelists! He’s not saying that gospel workers shouldn’t be supported financially, but that this shouldn’t be their motivation, and they should never exploit their position for personal profit. In poorer countries today, church leadership provides many temptations in the handling of money. I don’t want to judge harshly people who are under great pressure. But heed Peter’s words: appoint leaders whose life choices are not determined by salaries and pensions. Godly leaders are giving, not grasping.
- **v.3: “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock”** – Peter recalls how Jesus made leadership in His church dependent on service: *Mk 10:43* “Whoever wants to become great among you must be the servant of all”. Nobody is too exalted for the smallest act of service. If Jesus could wash feet, so can pastors. Christian leaders are to be examples, not emperors. Leaders, yes; dictators; no.

In the book, “Restoring the Kingdom”, Andrew Walker reports it being said of a prominent Christian leader that “*If he can’t win you over he’ll knock you over*” – if that’s true, then what was being restored wasn’t the kingdom of God but the kingdom of *this* world. That’s how this world’s leaders operate. Jesus said, Not so with you!

So Peter says the elders are “among” the flock (v.1) as well as “over” them (v.2) – they need *both* relationships. You can’t lead without a degree of authority, but you can’t lead like Jesus unless you are among the people to serve them. Pastoral authority only comes where the servant of Jesus seeks no power of his own, but is content to be a brother or sister alongside others in the fellowship submitted to the authority of God’s word.

Think on this cautionary truth: With leadership comes the temptation to pride. But we could also say that with pride comes the temptation to leadership – “*Look at me!*” Any Christian leader who says in his heart, “*I’m a celebrity ...*” should quickly add, “*... get me out of here!*”

When Peter spells out the qualities needed from the leaders of the church, he keeps the accent heavily on humility and service: willingly caring for the flock, not greedy for money but eager to serve, not lording it over the congregation but leading by example.

WELL: Who will accept this high calling to lead like Jesus – especially if it leads to extra persecution? Not those whose focus is on this world! But Peter knows of another world, and a day that’s coming:

3. THE ELDERS’ REWARD

v.4: “*And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*” Jesus is the Good Shepherd who died for the sheep (John 10:11). He’s also the Great Shepherd who lives for the sheep (Hebrews 13:20-21). And now Peter adds, Jesus is the Chief Shepherd who is coming for the sheep.

And he says to church leaders: the Shepherd in Heaven is not just concerned about the sheep – He’s concerned about the shepherds. He knows what you’re going through and He’s coming to reward you. Can we wait patiently for that day? Satan prowls (v.8), he discourages us, he tells us we’re wasting our time. But every lie that comes into our mind must be countered with the truth. There’s a day coming which will make everything worthwhile, and a crown of glory that will never fade away.

Sporting and military champions in Peter's day received crowns made of leaves – they didn't last very long. It's possible for pastors to work for fading crowns. But Jesus promises something better for His faithful servants, what Peter calls "*the crown of glory that will never fade away.*"

It's a powerful picture for those of us who live near Bath, one of the many places in Britain where we see the remnants of Roman occupation. Look in the glass cases of our museums and you'll see what's left of Rome's military supremacy – the faded glory of her Caesars. But the church is the living Body of One whose Kingdom shall outlast the years. Caesar is dead; Jesus is alive. The Roman empire is no more; Jesus shall reign for ever and ever.

That's the key! It's leaders who live for "*the crown of glory that will never fade away*" (v.4) who'll serve willingly and eagerly – who'll be happy to be Christ-like leaders instead of self-centred ones.

If I'm speaking to a Christian leader anywhere who is humbly serving at great cost, who is unrecognised, rarely thanked, feeling weary and burdened – then look up and look ahead. What a joy it will be for you when you receive your unfading crown from your Lord.

CONCLUSION

Brothers and sisters, that's godly leadership! God wants shepherds for His flock who'll get rid of self and promote Jesus. We all have responsibility to make sure that this is the kind of leadership we appoint, the kind of pastors we call. And those we call need our prayers. Any pastor / elder who wants to match up to the Good Shepherd is going to fail. But will you pray for your leaders, that we may approximate much more closely to this beautiful picture?

PRAYER: Father God, we thank you for Jesus, our Great Shepherd. Grant us leaders who reflect His goodness, and help us all by your Spirit to lay down our lives for the salvation of others; for your glory's sake. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND ACTION

- How does this passage move you to pray for your leaders?
- How do Peter's words challenge your attitude to your own service for Christ?