

# 1 Peter 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 0 0 ]     1 Peter chapter 5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

Be sober-minded, be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion for ever and ever. Amen. By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings. And so does Mark, my son. Greet one another with the kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ. 1 Peter chapter 5 concludes the epistle with some parting instructions and greetings. He turns to address the elders at the beginning, and his reason for doing so seems to follow from what he has just been talking about.

They are facing a fiery trial, so they will need oversight. Faithful elders will be especially important at this time. Elders here are probably referring to people with a more formal role, but it should not be detached from its more informal sense. When we talk about elders, we can often think about a formal office or function in some degree of detachment from its more generational sense. Yet the fact that elders are older is not unimportant. Certain things can only be known through experience, and as we live through the patterns of life, we experience those times of sowing and reaping the harvest of our past actions and commitments, and we experience the various seasons of life. Those who are older have gone through these seasons of life and can put their wisdom at the disposal of those who are younger. Peter speaks of himself as a fellow elder. He doesn't appeal to his apostolic authority, but presents himself alongside them as one who has the same sort of commitment of oversight. He is also a witness of the sufferings of Christ from a unique vantage point.

As Peter looked back upon the sufferings of Christ, no doubt he also recalled his denial, those memories being inseparably bound up together. He is also a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed. He has a foretaste of Christ's glory in the transfiguration, and he also has this experience that all Christians have of the Spirit that gives us a down payment and guarantee of what we will receive on the last day. Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God among them. The notion of the people of God as a flock and their leaders as shepherds is one that we find throughout the scriptures. The patriarchs were keepers of sheep, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph introduces his brothers in Egypt as shepherds. Moses, who once shepherded his sheep in the wilderness, shepherds Israel out of Egypt, leading them with a shepherd's rod. The young David is called from the flock to shepherd God's people Israel. Later in places like Micah chapter 5, the Messiah is described as a shepherd.

Christ, in John chapter 10, speaks of himself as the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for the sheep. When we think about shepherds, we can often have this image of bucolic mountainsides, perhaps the countryside of the English Lake District, and this very peaceful and serene scene.

[ 4 : 13 ] Yet shepherding, as it is described in scripture, is a far tougher profession. Shepherds had to lead their flock through the wilderness. They had to protect them from bandits and thieves. They had to protect them from wild beasts. David killed the bear and the lion. Jesus talks about laying down his life for the sheep. The shepherd in Israel had to tend for sheep in hostile and unforgiving terrain, to locate good pasture in an often dry land. The faithful minister is an under-shepherd of the chief shepherd, responsible to him for his flock. In John chapter 21 verses 15 to 17, Jesus had given this charge to Peter himself. When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Feed my lambs. He said to him a second time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? He said to him, Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. He said to him, Tend my sheep. He said to him the third time, Simon, son of John, do you love me? Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, Do you love me? And he said to him, Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. Jesus said to him, Feed my sheep. Under-shepherds are dependent upon and responsible to the chief shepherd. The flock is the flock of God, not their personal flock. And in places like Ezekiel chapter 34, we have an extensive indictment against the false shepherds who treat the flock of God as if it were their own, and then a description of how God, as the true chief shepherd, will seek out and tend for his flock.

In verses 1 to 6 and 11 to 16 of that chapter, The word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God, Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they had become food for all the wild beasts.

My sheep were scattered, they wandered all over the mountains, and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. For thus says the Lord God, Behold, I, I myself, will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep. And I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered, on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.

I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. The description of the true shepherd in 1 Peter chapter 5 should be looked at more closely. When we think about elders and pastors, we tend to think about leaders. But the description of the work of the shepherd here does not focus upon the theme of leading. The sorts of things that are foregrounded are tending, overseeing, presenting an example. Domineering, leading for mercenary purposes, or being an elder only under compulsion, are all opposed. True oversight must be a willing and eager activity, a loving activity exercised from the heart, not for mere financial gain. It should not be a matter of taking advantage and privilege over others, but of giving yourself as an example.

[ 8 : 29 ] The overseer has authority, but his authority is used in the way of service. What he looks for is not earthly treasure or human power, but the reward of glory that comes from the chief shepherd. When Christ, the good shepherd, appears, the good elder must be able to give a faithful account of his charge.

Those who are younger must be subject to their elders. They must respect their service, they must learn from their example, and they must allow themselves to be tended to by others, to be overseen and guided by humble leaders for their own good. There are virtues of good leaders, but there are virtues of good followers too. The more general deference towards the older generation that Peter encourages here is a bit counter-cultural in our own time. Our society idealises youth. Many of our churches have ceased to be intergenerational, and even when they are, they can continue to idealise youth. The older people can be aspiring to be young. A posture of humility should characterise Christians more generally. In our relations to one another, whether we are in positions of authority or under other people's authority, we must be characterised by humility and honouring each other.

Part of the radical message of the New Testament is that humility and honouring other people is not exclusive to those in lower positions in society. God himself is humble in his condescension to us.

Peter drives the point home by quoting Proverbs chapter 3 verse 34. He then moves into a series of short instructions.

We must humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. We should recognise and submit ourselves to God's providences. They are about to enter into this fiery trial, and they must recognise that God is the one who is in control of all things, even the trial that they are undergoing. Like Job had to submit to the hand of the Lord, so they have to submit. God will raise them up at the right time. Quoting Psalm 55 verse 22, he calls for them to cast their anxiety upon God. He cares for us. Just as our Lord charged Peter to watch and pray lest he enter into temptation, Peter presents his hearers with a similar challenge.

[ 10 : 38 ] Once again he tells them to be sober-minded and to be watchful. They must be alert, recognising that they are acting in hostile territory. The devil himself is seeking to destroy and to consume.

He is like a savage beast, a roaring lion. And what is needed to resist him is a strong, a firm, and a steadfast faith. In the struggle that they face, it will help them to recognise that these struggles come from God ultimately, and God will preserve them through them. Furthermore, the sufferings that they are experiencing are not exclusive to them. Other Christians elsewhere in the world are going through the same thing. And when the time comes, God will raise them up and bless them. He has called them to eternal glory in Christ, and they will reach that destination. He will restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish them. He ends with a benediction. Following the benediction, there are a number of short greetings. Silvanus is mentioned first of all. He is a faithful brother by whom Peter has written to them. This might be a reference to Silvanus being the one who bore the letter that was carried to different places. Or maybe Silvanus is the one who was the amanuensis. I believe it is more likely to be the latter. As Peter's amanuensis, it is possible that Silvanus exercised a lot of latitude in what he wrote. He might have been writing just according to the general theology of Peter, in his own words, with Peter approving and signing off on it at the end. There is plenty of room for debate, but the possibility of such involvement by Silvanus might explain the quality of the Greek that we see throughout the epistle, a quality of Greek that probably exceeds what we might expect from some with the education of a Galilean fisherman. Peter communicates greetings from she who is at Babylon.

She who is at Babylon is almost certainly not Peter's wife. Rather, it's a reference to the church. We find a similar female personification of the church in 2 John. Where is the Babylon in question?

It is almost certainly not the literal Babylon, which had been wiped out by that point. The traditional alternative to this is that Babylon is a reference to Rome, where the early tradition argues Peter lived for some time. Another possibility, depending upon your reading of Revelation chapter 17 and 18, is that Babylon is a reference to Jerusalem. We know that both Peter and Mark lived in Jerusalem, so it would not be surprising for them to send a letter from that city. Within the New Testament, we find several inversions of the Old Testament themes that associate Jerusalem with captivity. Jerusalem is in captivity with all of her children, Paul argues in Galatians chapter 4 verse 25. In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus reworks material that was originally associated with oracles against Babylon in the book of Isaiah and relates them to the destruction of Jerusalem.

And then, of course, in Revelation chapter 17 and 18, Jerusalem, I believe, is the Babylon the great, the harlot that is destroyed. Peter also communicates greetings from Mark. In Acts chapter 12, after he was released from prison by the angel, Peter went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

[ 13 : 40 ] The Mark here is almost certainly the Mark who wrote the second gospel. Recognising the association between Mark and Peter, we can also see something more of the unity between various parts of the New Testament. Matthew's gospel has affinities with James. The gospel of Mark is associated with the material of Peter, and Peter is associated also with Jude's material. Luke was a missionary companion for some time with the Apostle Paul, and John's material includes both his gospel, his epistles, and the book of Revelation. This suggests that there are essentially four families of material within the New Testament. And when we consider the overlap and the interaction between these families of material, we will have a fuller sense of the variegated unity of the New Testament as a corpus.

The letter ends with a charge to greet each other with a kiss of love. As in Paul, this token of affection was a sign of the unity of the church as the family of God. A question to consider. How does the vision of the oversight of elders and pastors that Peter presents in this passage serve as a challenge to prevailing notions of leadership in our day and age?

