

# Psalm 23

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[ 0 : 00 ] You be seated. We're spending three or four weeks looking at the subject of eldership, how our church is governed. I'm going to deal next week with the qualifications of who should be elders.

! But God willing, this series is preparing us, I hope, and we pray for new elders. That's what we're praying for and seeking to train.

And we are passionate, I hope, at seeing people equipped to serve God's church and to lead God's church.

The last week we looked at why elders are important. Do you remember we saw that eldership is a long and kind of established and ancient office. It wasn't dreamt up in the New Testament.

We see it at the end of Genesis. We see it in Exodus. You see it right the way through Scripture.

And we see that eldership is a gift of God to the church. From the Lord Jesus Christ, the ascended Lord Jesus.

[ 1 : 02 ] We saw that men are set apart by the laying on of hands. They're set apart for office and for sacrifice and for this office of eldership.

We saw that it's an office where qualifications are necessary. And it's an office with great authority as elders act on behalf of the Lord Jesus. It's an office where primarily the accountability is to God. Every elder will give an account of how they've discharged their duties. And finally, it's an office of immense practical value to the church. And I want to think tonight, well, what are the duties of an elder?

What should an elder be doing? And I think the best way of describing an elder is what we did with the children, is that of a shepherd. A shepherd or a pastor.

Sometimes the minister is called the pastor. But all elders are pastors of the flock. The minister, the pastor, is not the only under-shepherd.

[ 2 : 12 ] Christ is the good shepherd. But there are a number of under-shepherds in every congregation. And so all the elders are the shepherds of the people, the pastors. In Acts 20, in verse 28, Paul is speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus.

And he says, all the elders, he says to them, all be shepherds of the church of God. All of you have a pastoral function.

In 1 Peter 5, in verse 2, Peter is speaking to the elders in the churches in that area of Asia Minor.

And he says to them, be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care.

So the elder is to be a shepherd. It's not an optional extra where some are kind of focused on oversight. Some are focused on administration.

Some are kind of good at managing. And then maybe some are good at pastoring. No, every elder is to be a shepherd. And so if there is a candidate who is not pastoral, who is not a shepherd, they shouldn't be appointed a shepherd.

[ 3 : 19 ] We are described, aren't we, as the church, as a flock of sheep. A flock of God. And the elders are to care for those sheep.

Three things I want us to think of. I want to think of, first of all, the elder leads. In the east, sheep are not driven.

They are led. The shepherd goes out in front of them. The shepherd goes first. And the sheep follow. So do you remember what we read in Psalm 23?

The shepherd, the Lord our shepherd, he leads me beside quiet waters. And so the shepherd is leading. He's out in front. And the sheep are following.

In John 10, Jesus speaks of the shepherd. And he says, he calls his own sheep by name. And he leads them out. He goes on ahead of them. And the sheep follow him.

[ 4 : 17 ] Because they know his voice. So the shepherd leads. He goes ahead of the sheep. He's in advance of the sheep. And the sheep are behind him following. Following the shepherd who's leading them.

That's the picture. And that's the responsibility of the elder. In the church to lead. So how is the elder to lead? Again, the Bible tells us.

The Bible doesn't leave that as an optional extra. The elder is not to lead by a show of great authority. Although we saw last week, doesn't it, the elder has great authority given to him by King Jesus.

But he's not to lead in a kind of show of great authority. He is not to lead by bullying the sheep. Or driving the sheep. Or shouting at the sheep. We get part of the answer in 1 Peter 5 verse 3.

That the elder is not lording it over those entrusted to you. And so the elder is not to be strutting about the people of God filled with them. Because he's an elder.

[ 5 : 21 ] He's not to behave like a boss. He's not to behave like a manager. He's not to have a tyrannical rule. He is not to lord it over the people of God. Who are entrusted to him.

The sheep are not his sheep. They are God's sheep. And he is caring for them on behalf of his master.

And so the shepherd too is a servant. Don't lord it. Don't lord it over those entrusted to you. But he goes on doesn't he.

Be examples to the flock. That is how an elder is to lead. By the force of example. The elder's duty is to be a pattern.

A pattern of godliness. A pattern of Christ likeness. In every area of life. In the worship of the church.

[ 6 : 27 ] In prayer. In the ministry and the life and the work of a congregation. The elder is to be an example in his home. The elder is to be an example in his dealings with people.

He is to be an example in his love for the Lord. He is to be an example. So that people can follow him without fear.

So that they can imitate him. And copy him. And walk in his footsteps. Sometimes you hear or you read people say this.

They say. Don't follow me. Follow Christ. And that sounds doesn't it. Very spiritual doesn't it. It sounds very very noble.

It sounds very very pious. Very spiritual. But it is not biblical. It is not biblical. So we saw this morning didn't we. What does the apostle Paul say? He says. Follow me.

[ 7 : 28 ] As I follow Christ. So if an elder. Says to you. Don't follow me. I think you've got to ask the question.

Why? Why shouldn't I follow you? What are you doing that we can't follow? Where are you going that we can't follow? So just as it is the responsibility of.

Of a father and a mother. To live in the home. In such a way that. The children can follow that. We don't say to our children. Now. Don't do.

What I do. Do what God wants you to do. What would our children say to that? Our children would say to us. Wouldn't they? They'd say to us. Well why are you not doing what God wants you to do? And we have a responsibility.

As far as sinners can do. To live in such a way. That our children can safely follow us. That's our privilege. That's our responsibility. And so we who are elders tonight.

[ 8 : 29 ] We just can't shrug it off with a pious cliché. And say to people. Don't follow me. Follow the Lord. We can say with the same balance. That the apostle Paul had.

That. In so far as we're seeking to follow Christ. Follow me. I and the other elders. We are painfully aware.

That we don't do that perfectly. That there are ways. Which you shouldn't follow us. But we recognize our responsibility. To set an example. The elder must go ahead.

Of his people. That is his duty. That is what he is there for. So that people can follow him. And so. What a blessing it is.

Isn't it? To have. Such men in the congregation. It's an awesome task. The duty of an elder.

[ 9 : 25 ] The elder is to lead by an example. But the elder must also be a man. Who develops vision. The elder must be somebody. Who knows where the congregation.

Should be going. Who knows where he wants to be leading. Who knows which areas. The congregation needs. To be developing. In the years ahead. He's prepared to lead them there too. The elder is a man. Who wants to see the church. Heading in a particular direction. He's got a goal. Or a destination in mind. And can say to the people.

This is where God wants us to go. Come with me. The church is not a static thing. He's not someone who leads the people to stand still.

He's going in a direction. In every healthy church. There should be progress. And development. And growth. It's one of the reasons why I'm really passionate about appointing new elders regularly. [10:27] I think it's really helpful that new men come into an eldership. Into a session with new vision and new ideas. And say, why are you doing that? To refresh those who've been doing it for years.

To give a new perspective. The elder leads. Secondly, the elder feeds. The elder feeds. We're told, aren't we, in Psalm 23, do you remember?

The Lord is our shepherd. He makes me lie down in green pastures. And the responsibility of the shepherd is to see that the sheep are well fed.

The food for the sheep comes mainly from the pulpit. It comes mainly from the preaching of God's word. From the elder who gives himself fully to teaching.

But it's not outside the responsibility of other elders. It's their responsibility to see that the food of the word of God is pure.

[11:30] That the preacher is teaching the Bible and the truth of the scriptures to the people. And so we know, don't we, that in many parts of the church in the UK today, the church is fed with food that is not pure.

People preaching who don't believe the Bible. We've seen that this week, haven't we? People in positions of responsibility who want to twist the scripture so that it fits in with the culture.

Who do not preach the gospel. Don't set up the word in truth. It would be easy at this point for me to kind of rail against the Church of England.

And what has happened this week is sinful and an absolute tragedy. And we must pray for our brothers and sisters who are contending for the truth there. That they will be given wisdom and courage. But the history of Presbyterianism is that it is forever drifting into error.

It's interesting, isn't it, if I kind of go off on one for a moment. I think what you've normally seen in a Presbyterian setting is that the theological college where ministers are trained, that is normally where heresy starts.

[12:48] The next stop is the mission field. And missionaries are sent out who are not teaching the pure word of God. The next stop after theological college missionaries are the ministers.

Ordinarily, normally, the elders are the last to be infected. The elders are so needed.

But what has been the tragedy in Presbyterianism is that often elders have not had the courage or maybe the ability to rise up against error and protest against it. And so the sheep aren't fed.

In the church where I grew up in, it's kind of Calvinistic Methodist country, I could never work out why and it was never explained to me, but the minister would preach in this kind of high pulpit and then there was a big seat around, kind of seat vowed it was called, a big seat.

And the elders, they don't do this anymore in that church, they would sit in the big seat going around. And I could never work out why. I thought it was if an intruder came in and somebody was going to attack the minister, they would turn around.

[14:00] They were all old men, they wouldn't be much use. But the reason why was when the minister came down after preaching, give the benediction, and then he would go around the pew and he would shake the elders' hands, or they would shake his hands, to be accurate.

It was an endorsement. It was the elders saying in front of the congregation, Amen. It was the elders saying, We agree.

This message has been endorsed by the elders. I don't know what would have happened if they didn't shake the minister's hand, or the preacher's hand, but it was a visible sign that the authority rests in the eldership and the presbytery over the ministry of the word.

It's up to the elders to make sure that the food that the pulpit is giving the people is suitable. That the preacher is speaking in the language that people understand.

That he's not preaching above people's heads. That he's giving people a balanced diet. Every preacher I know except myself has hobby horses.

[ 15 : 10 ] Every preacher that I know, apart from myself, is unbalanced. I can't understand why people are not as balanced as I am. Some people are too jokey in the pulpit.

Some people are too stern. Some people preach the law too much. There's very few of them around now, but often in our culture, people don't preach the law at all. Some people are kind of too much in the kind of theology and too little in practice.

Many other people are the other way around. We've all got our imbalances. And it's incredibly valuable, I think, to have five or six colleagues who sit listening, who know the congregation, talk with the congregation, and who are able to assess and evaluate and tell you you're not communicating with people.

It's enormously helpful. And then the elder must be able to teach. I don't think that necessarily means public preaching, though it can mean that, and that's a great blessing to a congregation, where there are elders who can preach.

But it certainly means this, that the elder must be able to talk with people spiritually. And so you should expect, as members of this church, your elders to talk to you about your soul, to talk to you about your relationship with the Lord, to talk to you about how are you growing in the Christian life, what are you finding encouraging, what are you struggling with at the moment.

[ 16 : 49 ] That is what your elder is there for. They are not just there for genial conversation and chit-chat. They are there to care for your soul, to see that you will grow.

The elder must be able to use his Bible. Might not be great at publicly preaching and publicly speaking, but he should be able to point out to you the way of salvation from the Word of God. He should be able to point you to the Scriptures, those chapters and verses which have helped him. Those doctrines from our confession which would strengthen you.

The elders should be able to speak of their own spiritual experience. They should be able to speak to those who've got little appetite and have been neglecting the means of grace to gently bring back the wanderer, but also at times to look people in the eye and say, in the church of Jesus Christ, you cannot act like this.

All the elders share the responsibility for seeing that the sheep are well fed. So, if the preacher is not feeding the sheep adequately, it's the responsibility of the elders to lovingly, privately, sensitively to tell him.

[ 18 : 15 ] They cannot avoid that duty because they share that responsibility and the Lord will ask the elder if there's a bad ministry or an ineffective ministry or an unfruitful ministry, what do you do about it?

Did you try to help the preacher? Did you offer him advice? Did you counsel him? If the preacher doesn't receive the counsel and becomes angry about it, well, that's his responsibility.

But I'm trying to make the point that all the elders have a responsibility for feeding the flock. And so the elder leads and the elder feeds and then lastly, the elders protect.

The elder protects. Sheep, we don't see very many of them, but they are vulnerable creatures, aren't they? They are vulnerable creatures and that is why they need shepherds.

You don't leave sheep just in the middle of a road and let them be for an afternoon. Sheep need shepherds. That's why the Apostle Paul says, listen in Acts 20 and verse 29, after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.

[ 19 : 35 ] The psalmist says, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Why will you fear no evil? Because you are with me in your rod and your staff that comfort me.

You are with me. The rod and the staff were, they were weapons which would beat off wolves and bears.

The elder protects his sheep. And so the elder protects his sheep in several ways. The people need to be warned. They need to be warned about false and harmful teachings.

And so there is a need in the church for a negative, critical ministry. And that isn't very popular today, is it?

We are told, I am told, you must always be positive. But the Bible is not always positive. You read at the teachings of the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus is not always positive.

[ 20 : 44 ] The apostles were not always positive. And we need to teach people why certain things are wrong. Why certain teachings are unbiblical.

And we need to point out errors. We need to point out what are perversions of the Christian faith. And if elders don't do that, they are leaving you vulnerable and unprotected. It is sending out your young people into the world without a defense. One of the things we've seen, I think, over the last number of years, is we have seen relentlessly positive Christianity in the media. And so those spokesmen for Christianity will only speak of the positive but never speak about saying no to ungodliness. And the damage of that has been seen this week. And so from time to time, to protect the flock, elders need to be critical, and they need to be negative, and they will need to be condemnatory. They will do it with tears in their eyes like Philippians 3 talked about this morning.

[ 21 : 52 ] Sometimes, and this is very difficult, they will be critical of fellow Christians. And they will point out from Scripture why such and such a thing is wrong.

And where their errors lie. And so my plea to you as the congregation is don't resent that when it's done. Don't feel when that is done that the teaching ministry of the church is unloving. Actually, it's part of our love. It's part of our responsibility to point out the poison, to point out what is wrong so that you may be helped to avoid it. The sheep need protected from wolves.

And there are wolves, the Bible says, who enter the sheepfold. There are doctrinal wolves, aren't there? There are moral wolves. There are people who would come into a church and who would not be a blessing to the church but would disrupt and in the end destroy it.

people who may well be unconverted, people who are divisive, who would split a church and turn a church into turmoil and a war zone and lead the people away from peace and calm and unity.

[ 23 : 05 ] And it is the responsibility of the elders to protect the congregation and so that means we can't always be nice. Some of us find it very difficult to be nice. we've got to have a critical eye. We've got to see the wolf in sheep's clothing if we care for you.

We can't just throw the doors open wide. We're not allowed to do that. And Paul says, protect the sheep against the wolves and some of the wolves will be really well disguised.

Sheep will need help with their own spiritual illnesses. Perhaps the people of God have got a characteristic. that's harming their Christian witness and the elder goes to talk to you about that. And he goes to try and help you with that. Perhaps you're reacting in an unbiblical way to some pressure or difficulty and the elder has to help you with that and protect you against your own sin.

In and of ourselves, none of us are perfect, are they? We all need help and the help of under shepherds. And I think that's really helpful to us as we think and pray about who God may be calling to eldership.

[ 24 : 24 ] Think about that as you pray about it, as I hope you are praying about it. That as we speak about different men in the congregation, you think, is this someone from whom I could receive help?

help. It's a really difficult part of our work because we know ourselves how much help we need. As elders, we're very aware of how many mistakes we make. It is extremely difficult to go and talk to another person about their faults because there's a little voice inside us saying, well, what about your faults, Levy?

There's also very real fear, too, that someone will take it badly, that someone will become angry, that we will be unpopular, that they'll say hard things against us, against the church, that if I go to see them about this issue, it will cause a problem in the congregation and maybe they might leave. And so there's a tremendous temptation for all elders to neglect this, to opt for a quiet life, anything for a quiet life. But if we love you, if we love the sheep, we have to care for you.

[ 25 : 41 ] Jesus says, the good shepherd, speaking of himself, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. And so elders must run the risk of you being angry with us.

We have to love you more than we love our reputation, than our own popularity, than our own peace of mind. If elders really care for their sheep, if they care for their sheep, they will have the courage to deal with and pray that you see the love behind that dealing.

The shepherd protects the sheep and he protects the sheep at the risk of his own life. And when a shepherd is afraid to do that and doesn't do that, let me tell you, he will be very, very popular.

And he will be very highly regarded. And people would say, you know, what a wonderful, lovely, nice man. But the sheep suffer.

The sheep suffer. For those of us who are parents, if you saw your child with some fault or issue or some behavior that you saw was wrong, there's something in every parent that doesn't actually

want to do anything about it.

[ 27 : 09 ] There are times on there in parenthood when it would just be easier to let it go. We don't want a scene if they're young. We don't want the crying.

If they're older, we don't want the crying either. You don't want the upset. It's far easier to let it go. I promise you, children, it's far easier for your parents sometimes just to let it go.

But because they love you, they will deal with it. and they have to deal with it because it's not going to go away. And there are churches I know, there are ministers that I know and love and elders that I know and love that are suffering because they have had the courage and the love to try and deal with sin in people.

And it has been bitterly resented. Bitterly resented. And we should honor such men and support them in our prayers. The elder leads.

The elder feeds. And the elder protects. And I can't finish this sermon without saying this, that we who are already elders, we must ask for your forgiveness for our many failures.

[ 28 : 31 ] I've not told the other elders I'm going to say this, but I know I speak for them too.

Because none of us have done this as well as we should have. And we should ask forgiveness from God.

And let us pray for more such men. We'll see in the next couple of weeks how you can help your elders carry out these duties. Let's pray together.

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