

Introduction:

A couple of months ago, the Franklin church faced a very sad day. Charles Nash, after serving faithfully as an elder for many years, stepped down. At the same time, it was a day to rejoice in the great labor he had done in Christ's kingdom and the great benefit he has been to the sheep in this flock over the years. I bring this up because brother Nash made a comment as he read his letter of resignation. He claimed that the work of an elder is just that. It is not a position. It is not a title. It is a work. But what work? Sadly, many have mistaken views regarding what it means to be an elder, therefore they spend no time preparing to do the work. I hope many of you, the men in this congregation, are looking forward to filling that role. However, I want to disillusion you of many of the fallacies some carry about it. Being an elder, bishop, pastor or overseer is not just a title. Nor is it some position of dominant power. It does not mean being in control. Rather, it is a great role of service to the congregation. Perhaps no greater term provides the picture for what the elder or pastor does than the term "shepherd" used in **I Peter 5:2**. Elders are not to run the congregation. They are not to manage the congregation. They are not to administer the congregation. They are to shepherd. But what does that entail? What better place to look than to the Chief Shepherd mentioned in **I Peter 5:4**. What better place to look at the Chief Shepherd than **Psalms 23**. Within that psalm, I believe we can uncover four great responsibilities shepherds must fulfill. Certainly, our shepherds need to measure their present work against this standard. However, the reason I'm preaching this to you instead of just meeting with our elders is because each and every man in this congregation needs to consider this work and plan to grow to be able to do this. Even if you never become an elder, you will be benefited by this challenge.

Discussion:

- I. Shepherds must lead the sheep.
 - A. Obviously, the number one picture of the shepherd is leadership. **Psalms 23** mentions leadership twice. "He leads me beside still waters" (**Psalms 23:2**). "He leads me in paths of righteousness..." (**Psalms 23:3**). The reason leadership is integral to shepherding is because sheep, if left in one place too long, will destroy the land they graze. They become so accustomed to favorite spots that their grazing grounds become well-worn and infested with parasites. The sheep become infected with worms, the land is destroyed, and in the end the sheep will die. The greatest protection for the sheep is for the shepherd to keep them on the move. Isn't that exactly what can happen with a congregation? Without leadership, without someone challenging us and leading us ever onward, we become stagnant, stale, lifeless. We walk the same trails until they are ruts. We graze the same fields until they are a desert waste. If you want to be an elder someday, you must learn to lead.
 - B. David said the good shepherd leads beside still waters. A sheep's body is 70% water. Thus while they thrive in dry, semi-arid cultures, they require water. Sheep drink from three sources. First, from streams and springs. Though these are natural, the shepherd must search out the pure streams, sometimes having to work long hard hours diverting a pure spring to a place the sheep can drink. Second, they drink from wells. But those wells don't get there on their own. Shepherds have to dig them and bail the water so the sheep can drink. Third, amazingly enough, they also get a lot of water from the dew off the grass. However, the shepherd must prepare the fields to be edible. Leading beside still waters is no small feat. The picture of still and quiet waters, is a picture of calm, pure, clean water. **Jeremiah 2:13** presents the problem. Too many of the sheep hew out their own cisterns. They forsake the living waters of God's spirit and follow their own desires. Our shepherds must lead us by the still waters of God's word and not man's design. This ties in with leading in paths of righteousness. We are to be a people who hunger and thirst for righteousness, that is where our shepherds are to lead.
 - C. Note God used sheep and shepherds as His picture, not cattle and driver. Sheep can be led. They hear the voice of their shepherd and follow (cf. **John 10:3-4**). Cattle, however, must be driven poked, prodded and pushed from behind. Sadly, too many shepherds try this approach with the sheep. That is why Peter pointed out in **I Peter 5:3** that the shepherds must not domineer over the flock. By the way, this is just as much about the shepherds as it is the sheep. The sheep follow the shepherd's lead, knowing the shepherd's voice because the shepherd has

taken time to get to know the sheep. The sheep know the shepherds care. The sheep know the shepherds are looking out for their best interests. Often, congregations don't want to follow their shepherds because the shepherds haven't prepared their relationships with the sheep either before or after being appointed as elders.

- D. One final note about leadership. Sadly, far too many shepherds in the Lord's body are not leading but being led. They do not look ahead and see where to lead the sheep. They do not plan. They do not have vision. They do not have foresight. They react to what happens to them. That is a one way ticket to death of the flock. If you want to be an elder, learn to lead.

II. Shepherds must feed the sheep.

- A. **Psalm 23:5** says, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies..." For sheep and shepherd, this does not present a picture of a banqueting table in a hall for feasts. Rather, it speaks of the tablelands in the mountains, the higher feeding grounds of the summers. The preparing of the tablelands is all about feeding. The shepherds must go ahead of the sheep and prepare the table. They take salts and minerals to prepare the land so they will feed the sheep well. They clear the lands of predators and remove the poisonous weeds. Feeding the sheep is far more than simply finding a place with grass. Feeding the sheep means work.
- B. No doubt, evangelists are to proclaim the good news even teaching the congregation as Paul taught Timothy and Titus. However, the shepherds are responsible for the feeding. That is why **Titus 1:9** says the elders must be able to hold firm to the trustworthy word to give instruction in sound doctrine and to rebuke those who contradict the sound doctrine. It is the sad plight of many churches that the preacher is the one the church relies on for guidance and feeding because the shepherds don't know how to feed. Too many shepherds simply hire someone to teach and make decisions about what classes should be taught, but they do no feeding themselves. The shepherd who leads and teaches well is worthy of double honor according to **I Timothy 5:17**. If you want to be a shepherd someday, do not learn how to balance budgets and administer businesses. Learn how to handle the word of God. Learn how to feed the sheep.

III. Shepherds must protect the sheep.

- A. **Psalm 23:5** said the shepherd prepares the table in the presence of the enemies. That is, even though the predators look on, the sheep are able to eat because of the shepherd's protection. Additionally, **Psalm 23:4** says the sheep can walk in the valley of the shadow of death, but fear no evil. This verse is not talking about the days preceding death. It is talking about the sheep being led up the valleys to those tablelands. Those valleys were some of the most treacherous lands. The fears of avalanche, flash floods, rock slides, poisonous plants and the predators that could ravage the flock cast their shadow along those valleys. But with the good shepherd, the sheep need not fear.
- B. This is the role of our elders and our shepherds. They protect us from the enemies. They lead us in paths of righteousness that we may avoid Satan's snare. This is why Paul warned the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:28-32** to take care of the flock. They must protect from enemies within and enemies without (cf. **Titus 1:10-11**). If you want to be a shepherd, you must learn to recognize the temptations and dangers Satan lays before the sheep and help them overcome. If you want to be a shepherd, you must learn and understand the errors that pull sheep away from the flock. If you want to be a shepherd, you need to learn to understand the sheep so you may know when they are struggling and how to help them.
- C. There is one aspect of protecting the sheep we don't like to discuss very much. But the shepherd protects the sheep by disciplining the sheep. In **Psalm 23:4**, David said the rod and staff of the Lord comforted him. One of the rod's main uses was discipline. If a wayward sheep was heading into danger, the shepherd would hurl his rod through the air to send the sheep scurrying back to the flock. Sadly, too often today, shepherds are afraid to administer discipline because they fear being accused of spiritual abuse. There is spiritual abuse. Some churches and shepherds are guilty of it. However, just as there is a difference between disciplining and abusing a child, there is a difference between spiritual discipline and spiritual abuse. **I Corinthians 5:4-13** demonstrates we must discipline those who would leaven the congregation with their sin for two reasons. One, that the one disciplined may learn and scurry back to the flock. Two, that

the flock will not be turned aside by the straying sheep. This is not a matter of abuse, but protecting the flock. Shepherds must step up and be ready to administer this discipline for the good of the sheep.

- D. If you want to be shepherd, you must build up your courage. You must build up your knowledge. You must learn how to protect the sheep. The devil is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (**I Peter 5:8**). Being a shepherd doesn't mean trying to keep everyone in line with your will. It means serving others that they may be saved.

IV. Shepherds must restore the sheep.

- A. **Psalm 23:3** says the shepherd restores the sheep. For the shepherd, this is a huge word picture. It is the picture of **Matthew 9:36**. The word translated "helpless" is actually the word meaning "cast down." Sheep easily become cast down. The sheep may find a nice soft spot and stretch out to lay down, but its center of gravity shifts and it rolls over, unable to get its feet back on the ground. It lays there struggling to get back up, but is unable. Or, a sheep trying to get to a bit of grass pushes into some brush. Its wool hangs in the brush and it can't get away. The more it thrashes, the more embedded it gets. If the shepherd doesn't find the sheep, it will die from exhaustion. Sometimes the sheep may offer weak bleats for help, but usually the shepherd must keep watch and find this sheep. Jesus also used this same kind of picture when he told the parable of the lost sheep in **Luke 15:4-5**. The good shepherd will leave the 99 in the open country to find the one lost sheep in order to restore him.
- B. This is so integrally part of the shepherds' role it was the center of God's rebuke against the shepherds of Israel in **Ezekiel 34:4**. They were supposed to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the straying and seek the lost. Instead, they had self-centeredly led the sheep, using the sheep for their own good. Restoring the sheep demonstrates the true selflessness of the shepherd who will keep ever vigilant and even travel the wilderness to restore the sheep. This is the great demonstration of service. You see, the elders' job is not that of commanding the sheep. The elders' job is that of serving the sheep. Putting their needs first, being there when the sheep are distressed and downcast, restoring their souls, placing them on good footing.
- C. Alongside this restoration is the comfort the shepherd provides the sheep. In **Psalm 23:2**, David said his shepherd made him lie down in green pastures. Phillip Keller, in his book **A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23**, explains four conditions for a sheep to be willing to lie down. 1) Freedom from fear of outside attack. 2) Freedom from tension and friction within the fold. 3) Freedom from hunger. But the fourth is the big thing we want to note here. 4) Freedom from pests. The sheep would be attacked by flies, gnats, worms, parasites. In **Psalm 23:5**, David spoke of his head being anointed with oil. He was talking about the oils and salves the shepherd applied to ward off the annoying little pests. The shepherd works hard to protect his flock from those pests that will take away his serenity. He restores the sheep and provides comfort for them.
- D. This takes work. It takes time. It takes sacrifice. It is no wonder when the Hebrew writer spoke of our leaders in **Hebrews 13:17**, it said they "keep watch." The word there literally means "without sleep." The job of the shepherd is sleepless, ever watchful. Here is the point. If you want to be an elder someday, you must learn to sacrifice yourself to restore and comfort the sheep.

Conclusion:

So, you want to be an elder someday. I hope you understand becoming an elder does not provide you with rights. It provides you with responsibilities. You do not become the served. You become the greatest of servants. If you wish to be an elder, you must prepare to give yourself up in service to the sheep. You must prepare to devote your life to leading, feeding, protecting and restoring the sheep. You won't learn how to do that overnight just because a congregation calls you an elder. You must start right now working to that end.