

Feed the Flock of God — 1 Peter 5 and the Proverbs of the Shepherd

Ministry · October 3, 2010

Peter's Exhortation — Among, Not Over

First Peter 5:1–4 gives a charge whose weight comes in part from who gives it. Peter calls himself a fellow elder — not an apostle asserting authority, but one among elders. And a witness of the sufferings of Christ. Peter had seen the Lord suffer. He had wept bitterly after his own denial. He knew what it was for sin to be present and for a holy person to feel every moment of it. And also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed. Already a partaker — for whoever has eternal life is already a sharer in the glory that is yet to be manifested. The sufferings and the glory: the full range of the Christian pathway, witnessed and shared by the one who gives the charge.

The charge itself is simple: feed the flock of God which is among you. Not the flock which is under you. The elders were among the flock, not above it. And they were to take oversight not by constraint but willingly, not for base gain but of a ready mind, not as lords over God's heritage but as examples to the flock. Three negatives and three positives, each pair describing the same thing from opposite sides. The flock is not theirs. It is God's. The oversight is a stewardship, not a possession.

And when the chief shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. The good shepherd gave His life for the sheep — that is His work of redemption. The great shepherd brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus — that is His resurrection. The chief shepherd will appear — that is His coming again, and it is in the context of under-shepherds and their service. The

crown of glory that does not fade is the encouragement for what is not always an easy path.

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly. — 1 Peter 5:2

The Commission Rooted in Love — Peter's Restoration

This charge to feed the flock has its roots in John 21. When the Lord restored Peter by the sea of Tiberias, He asked him three times: lovest thou me? And it was at the point where Peter had the confidence that the Lord valued his love — not Peter's assurance of his own faithfulness, but his love — that the Lord said: feed my sheep. The feeding commission was given in the context of love. A heart that is with the flock is what makes the feeding real.

The flock, moreover, is wider than any assembly. It takes in the whole household of faith. Every believer has contact with those who belong to the Lord though they may not yet be in the same position of understanding. The commission to feed is not limited to any special class of persons — it belongs to those among whom there has been spiritual growth, and who have been with the good shepherd in the green pastures themselves.

The Proverbs of the Shepherd — Dainties, an Evil Eye, and Force Feeding

Proverbs 23:1–3 gives a picture that sets off the nature of true feeding: when thou sittest to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before thee, and put a knife to thy throat if thou be a man given to appetite. Be not desirous of his dainties, for they are deceitful meat. The ruler's table is not the green pasture. Rulers make rules. But rules are not food for the flock of God. And there is something in the flesh that gravitates toward dainty things and sweet words, things that go down easily and produce a pleasant feeling. That is not what feeds the soul.

Proverbs 23:6–8 continues: eat thou not the bread of him that hath an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats. For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he. Eat and drink, saith he to thee, but his heart is not with thee. The morsel which thou hast eaten shalt thou vomit up, and lose thy sweet words. An evil eye is an eye not fixed on Christ. And the man whose heart is not with those he would feed will find that what he gives cannot nourish. The manipulation of others, the feeding of dainties for personal effect, the trafficking in sweet words without the heart's affection for the flock — these are the opposite of what Peter describes. Eat and drink, says such a man, but his heart is not with thee. And in the end, the morsel is vomited up and the sweet words are lost.

The picture of force feeding is the extreme of this: someone who takes the sheep by the neck and shoves handfuls of grass down its throat is not feeding it, whatever quantity is delivered. There is something categorically wrong about it. That is not how God meant for sheep to be fed. The feeding that builds up the flock is the feeding that comes from one who has been in the green pastures themselves, who has sat beside the still waters, whose soul has been restored by the shepherd — and who then leads others there.

The Lord Is My Shepherd — The Pattern

Psalm 23 gives the pattern: the Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. The shepherd leads into the green pasture. He does not point and say, the green pasture is over there, go ahead. He goes himself, and the flock follows. The one who would feed the flock of God must first be fed — must be found beside the still waters himself, must have his soul restored, must be walking in the paths of righteousness. He that waters others is watered himself. The chief shepherd is over the under-shepherd too, and feeds all His own.

First Peter 5:10 closes the whole with its magnificent summary: the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, establish, strengthen, settle you. On one side, the adversary the devil as a roaring lion. On the other, the suffering that is part of the pathway. In the middle, the God of all grace — every kind of grace, for every kind of need. This is the true grace of God wherein ye stand. May the Lord give us grace to feed the flock of God with the heart of love that the commission requires, and to lead others where He has led us.

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