

SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD¹

Elders in the biblical world, *Numbers 11:16-17*

This lesson begins a series of three lessons on elders in preparation for the beginning of the process to appoint additional elders for our church family. This lesson will focus on the historical background of elders in the Bible and how that background emphasizes that **elders are older men recognized by their community as individuals of proven character and wisdom to whom they entrust their care.**

Beginning Considerations

- God intended all humans to lead His creation (*Genesis 1:26-28*).
- Humans needed wisdom to fill that role, but they chose to seek it on their own rather than seek it from God (*Genesis 3:1-6*).
- Humanity's rebellion against God changed the dynamics God intended between humans, including the shape of leadership (*cf. Genesis 1:26-28; 3:16*).
- Leadership roles in the Bible consequently develop out of that context and often find themselves filled with individuals whose own failings illustrate our ongoing need for leadership that seeks God's wisdom rather than pursuing their own wisdom.

Elders in the Old Testament

- In two separate letters, Paul lists the qualifications of elders (*1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9*), indicating the important and formalized role they held in the early church.
- But the elders that one encounters in the New Testament did not suddenly appear as a new position; they developed out of a long-standing and wide-spread role in the biblical world.
 - While "elder" literally refers to an older person (*cf. Genesis 27:1-2*), the term also applied to a select group of older men who occupied leadership roles within their communities throughout the biblical world (*cf. Genesis 50:7; Exodus 3:18*).
 - Elders were older men known for their wisdom and experience and who, because of their standing in their community, were held up by their community as leaders.
 - Israel's organization around family lines provided a natural setting for elders who, as the heads of extended families, occupied an important place within the nation.
 - For example, the Old Testament offers insights into elders' role in Israel.
 - God expected Israel's elders to be involved in the negotiations between Moses and Pharaoh (*Exodus 3:16, 18; 4:29*).
 - Elders were part of the Holy Spirit empowered leadership during Moses' time (*Numbers 11:16-17; cf. Exodus 18:13-26; 24:1*).

¹ *1 Peter 5:2*. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.



- God entrusted to elders the responsibility to teach and enforce obedience to His covenant with Israel (*Deuteronomy 27:1; 22:13-21*).
- The Old Testament lists elders as peers to the other leaders in the nation such as judges (*Deuteronomy 21:2*), priests (*Leviticus 4; Deuteronomy 31:9*), and kings (*2 Samuel 3:17*).
- The Jewish elders survived the collapse of the monarchy and became a key part of the leadership that developed in the intertestamental period (*Jeremiah 26:17; Ezekiel 8:1; Ezra 10:16*).
- Surveying the role of elders in Israel in the Old Testament offers a few insights.
 - Elders were a select group of older men recognized by their community as possessing wisdom and experience the people trusted.
 - Elders were thus recognized as men of character qualified to serve as leaders.
 - Elders were entrusted with the responsibility of deciding disputed cases, interpreting law, administering discipline, preserving the community's traditions.

Elders in the New Testament

- As one might expect given the Israelite origins of Jesus' church, elders appear very early in the church's story (*Acts 11:30*).
- But elders were more than merely the adaption of Jewish practices; Paul wrote that elders were part of the leadership Jesus gifted to the church that enable it to fulfill its mission (*Ephesians 4:7-16*).
- Every church consequently possessed its own eldership (*cf. Acts 14:30*), which functioned alongside the apostles as authorities in difficult matters (*cf. Acts 15*).
- As in the Old Testament, the New Testament places emphasis upon the character of elders. Unlike the Old Testament, however, the New Testament gives a clear set of character requirements one must meet to serve as an elder (*1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9*).
- A few things become apparent about elders' role in the New Testament.
 - Elders in the church participate in a long-standing tradition of leadership.
 - Elders must meet certain character qualifications to be appointed to the position.
 - Elders must meet those qualifications because they represent God and His people, serving as mediators and administrators.
 - Elders require community consent; their character needs to be recognized by the community they lead.

Applications

- We need leaders, but we need leaders who meet God's standards.
- Godly character practiced with integrity in all situations matters most.

May God guide us as we look for additional elders. May He bless us with godly leaders who seek His wisdom and submit to His will.

