

SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD¹

Elders, overseers, and shepherds, *Acts 20:17-35*

Luke, in Acts 20, narrates Paul’s journey to Jerusalem. Despite “hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost” (*Acts 20:16*), Paul took time to stop in Miletus and meet with the elders of the church in Ephesus (*Acts 20:17*). Luke uses three different terms to refer to those elders in his record of Paul’s conversation – “elders” (*Acts 20:17*), “overseers” (*Acts 20:28*), and shepherds (*Acts 20:28*). Luke’s descriptions of elders map the role of the leaders to whom God entrusts the care of local congregations (*cf. Acts 20:28*) and offers insights into their place within our church family. We will therefore consider the terms “elders”, “overseers”, and “shepherds” in this lesson as we prepare to begin the process to appoint additional elders for our church family.

Wise elders

- While the Greek word for “elder” (*presbuteros*) literally means ‘old, older man’, it came to carry a sense of importance because of the connections between age and wisdom/experience.
- Over time in the Greek world, “elder” came to refer to institutional functions in society because of the wisdom needed to fill those roles. The word, for example, often referred to an ambassador, someone who represented his people and negotiated for them (*cf. Luke 14:32*, “delegation”).
- The Jewish people had elders too, who appear on a number of occasions in the gospels. Those elders formed the Sanhedrin, a kind of Jewish high court that helped determine the traditions that shaped the daily, religious life of the Jewish people (*cf. Matthew 15:1-2*).
- The New Testament also uses the word to refer to the leaders of local churches and offers insights into their role (*cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5*). “Elders” were appointed leaders of their church community and were:
 - Selected for their wisdom and experience (*1 Timothy 3:6; Titus 1:9; cf. Proverbs 1:7*).
 - Given the responsibility of interpreting God’s law and settling disputes (*cf. Acts 15:6, 22*).

Trustworthy overseers

- The word “overseer” translates the Greek word *episkopos* (sometimes translated as “bishop”) literally means ‘one who watches’. In the Greek world, the word generally referred to individuals with the responsibility to oversee, manage, protect, and guard.

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.



- The Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the word in the same way, applying it, for example to civil leaders (*cf. Nehemiah 11:9*) and to God's covenant care of His people (*cf. Deuteronomy 11:12*).
- In the New Testament, "overseers" came to refer to a special group of leaders to whom God entrusted the administration and management of the church (*Acts 20:28*).
- Because of their responsibility to administer and manage, overseers in the church must be:
 - Men who demonstrate the ability to properly manage through the way they oversee their family (*1 Timothy 3:4-5*).
 - Men of character marked by integrity and self-control, free from traits that would compromise their effectiveness to care for the church (*Titus 1:7-8*).

Caring shepherds

- At an early date in the biblical world, "shepherd" became a title of honor applied to kings and gods alike.
- While the Old Testament rarely uses "shepherd" as a title, it does hold out the expectation of shepherd-like behavior.
 - Israel's experiences of living under God's care led them to describe Him as a shepherd (*cf. Psalm 23; Jeremiah 23:1-4*).
 - Israel's kings were expected to act as faithful shepherds of God's flock (*2 Samuel 5:2; Jeremiah 23:1-4; Ezekiel 34:2-10*).
 - In contrast to the failures of Israel's leaders, whom God described as unfaithful shepherds, the prophets announced God's messianic ruler who would be a faithful shepherd (*Ezekiel 34:23; 37:24*).
- Even though the Old Testament commonly uses shepherding imagery to picture the character of God and His leaders, the Jewish people widely despised shepherds during the New Testament times.
- It is against that backdrop that the New Testament calls elders to shepherd the church (*Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 5:2-3*), a description that rejected cultural tastes to draw a parallel between God's own care and protection of His people and the care and protection He expected elders to exercise over the churches He entrusted to them.

Applications

As we look for additional elders, we need to seek men who have:

- Wisdom gained from both personal experience and knowledge of God's word.
- The ability to be faithful administrators of the spiritual life of our church family.
- Love-motivated care of our church family.

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.

