

The God of All Grace

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 0 0] This is the AM service on the 31st of May 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled, The God of All Grace, and is from 1 Peter, chapter 5, verses 1 to 14.
- Please be seated. And you may like to turn to page 986 in the Black Pew Bibles in front of you to follow the passage from 1 Peter, chapter 5.
- The Lord is my shepherd. Well-known words expressing a basic way by which the Bible understands God's relationship to people.
- God is a shepherd. We are his sheep. And that is one way in which, a major way in which, the Bible understands the relationship between God and his people.
- [1 : 0 7] But more than that, the shepherd idea is also a way by which the Bible understands the leaders of God's people. The Lord is my shepherd. But David, King David, the great king of Israel in the Old Testament, was a shepherd king.
- And the way by which he was meant to look after God's people was by being a shepherd to them. Just as he had been a shepherd of sheep before he became king, now he was, when king, to be shepherd of God's people.
- Later in the Old Testament, the prophets chastised the kings and rulers of God's people because they failed to be good shepherds.
- They failed to feed and failed to protect the flock of God's people. But then later also again in the Old Testament, the prophets anticipate a future where God would send a good shepherd, a true shepherd, who would faithfully shepherd God's sheep.
- And then later again, in the New Testament, this time comes the one who says, I am the good shepherd. I am the one who lays down his life for his sheep.
- [2 : 1 7] The Lord Jesus is our shepherd. But the model for Christian leaders remains the same as in the Old Testament.
- Christian leaders, like in the Old Testament, are also to be shepherds of God's people. And that is the model that Peter has at the beginning of this chapter.
- He writes to his churches that he's writing to, Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge.
- Shepherd the sheep is literally what it says. Tend the flock. Peter writes as a fellow elder.
- He writes as one who also is to shepherd the sheep. After the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus spoke to Peter and said to him three times, Feed my sheep.
- [3 : 2 1] So Peter writes as one who is a shepherd already of sheep. And he's writing to the leaders of these various churches to which he writes, You also are to shepherd sheep. That's the model for Christian leadership that Peter has in mind.
- The word elder that's used is a word to denote probably an official office rather than somebody of old age. Notice also whose flock it is.

Tend the flock of God that is in your charge. Not your flock or Peter's or a minister's, but God's flock. Tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight.

Not ownership, but oversight. It is God's flock. And the word for oversight is the word from which we get the word episcopal, as in to do with a bishop.

But the model for a bishop here and throughout the New Testament is of a humble shepherd of sheep. There's no place in the New Testament for the purple-plumed pompous prelates that we sometimes think of as bishops, but rather a humble shepherd of sheep.

[4 : 35] There are lots of recent books on Christian leadership, but often they seem to go astray or get it wrong or switch priorities. Most weeks I get some book catalogue or some notice about some book about leadership, how I can be a better leader, how I can be a better decision maker or manage people or change people or transform people.

How can I develop the leadership within me? How can I network with great and glorious Christian leaders of the past and present and probably future? But the basic job of any Christian leader is to feed sheep, to feed, nourish them with God's word, to protect them and keep them safe in the faith of God.

That's what the job of any Christian leader is. And before you think that I'm talking about myself or the staff or full-time ordained clergy, this is wider than that.

Vestry members, church wardens, Bible study leaders, children's teachers, children's or youth group leaders, anybody involved in pastoral care within the parish, anybody involved in helping to lead a group within the parish, this is for you as well as for me.

Christian leadership and ministry belongs to the many, not just the few and certainly not just the ordained. So many of us are being addressed here. For many of us have some part of God's flock under our care in some way.

[6 : 01] And for us, Peter gives three timeless warnings. He goes on to say, not doing it this way, but this way, not doing it that way, but this way, not doing it this way, but that way.

Three things he contrasts. Three warnings against sloth, against greed and against power. Three things that remain temptations for people, let alone Christian leaders today.

So he says in verse 2, you are to exercise your oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly as God would have you do it. Not under compulsion, not being forced or not being reluctant, not being half-hearted.

The centuries before this one in England, often the second son would become ordained. It was standard procedure in certain classes. That's being involved in ministry under compulsion or constraint.

Not being willing as God would have you do it. So if you're involved in some sort of Christian leadership or ministry, make sure you're doing it willingly, not just because somebody's told you to, not because you feel you have to, not because you're constrained to do it, but willingly, as God would have you do it.

[7 : 14] But probably also, this is a charge against those who are lazy. It's a great job if you want to be lazy, being a Christian minister. Very easy to be lazy, slothful, indolent, careless, slack.

But rather, Christian ministry is to be done willingly, full-heartedly, working hard, and not slackly. The second contrast at the end of verse 2 is not for sordid gain, but eagerly.

This is not arguing that Christian ministry ought not to be paid, but rather that the motive ought not to be greed. We're all familiar, probably, with the US tele-evangelists and other Christian leaders who've been found to be accumulating great wealth from their ministry.

But just because God's people may be sheep is not an excuse for leaders to fleece them. The issue, you see, is not how much Christian ministers earn, but rather their motives for greed.

It's one reason why I and now the parish as a whole don't keep clergy fees for weddings and funerals and so on. Because I don't want a phone call from a funeral director to say to me, will you take this funeral?

[8 : 28] I think, well, I can do with a bit more money, yes. Wrong motive. Rather, Christian leaders ought to exercise their ministry eagerly.

The word that's used in that verse where Paul writes, God loves a cheerful giver. Somebody who's generous and cheerful in giving, in selfless service, rather than in selfish gain.

That's the model for Christian leadership and ministry here. The third one comes in verse 3. Not lording it over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

This is the desire for wrong power. A power that is manipulative or threatening or forceful. We're familiar, perhaps, with the Jonestown massacre 20 years ago.

What an abuse of power that was. But that sort of abuse of power is not confined just to cults and sects either. It's found in mainstream churches, sadly, from time to time.

[9 : 28] I guess all Christian leaders are vulnerable to the temptations of wrong power. But the power that Christian leaders are to exercise is the power of a godly example.

Not lording it over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. Well, let me say that I think this is the hardest challenge for me in my ministry.

Though I find, say, preaching hard, it is easy by comparison to stand and say, do what I say, but not necessarily what I do.

It is tempting to push us to model our lives on Jesus, but what this is saying is that for Christian leaders there ought to be a place where we say, model your life on me as I model my life on Jesus.

I must say I find that very daunting in my own life. These three things are timeless temptations to slothfulness, greed and power.

[10 : 32] And all Christian leaders in Peter's day as in ours are vulnerable to those temptations. Notice that in the end, you see, what's important is character, not charisma.

It is character, godly character, that in the end qualifies somebody for good Christian leadership and ministry. So for those of you who are on the incumbency committee, not that I expect you'll be working for many years to come, but the next time you're looking for a new vicar of this parish, remember this passage.

Look for somebody who fits these qualities, not for somebody who might have the charisma or flashy gifts that are so attractive in our day and age. But it's not just for vicars, of course.

Next time you're voting for vestry members at the annual meeting, next time you're thinking about or looking for somebody to be a Bible study leader or to look after a children's group or something, these are the qualities and characteristics that that person needs.

Don't forget that because so often our world is looking for other qualities of leadership that may actually be good, but these are essential. The promise for any faithful Christian minister or leader is that when the chief shepherd appears, that's Jesus of course, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away.

[11 : 53] Not the laurel wreath that the athletes would win when they completed their race, a laurel wreath that might last a few days or even weeks but then fade and turn brown and dry up and be brittle and break, but rather a crown of glory that lasts forever, the victor's crown, but an eternal victor's crown.

That is the promise for any faithful Christian leader or minister here in 1 Peter 5. Peter briefly addresses himself to those who are not elders.

In the same way he says in verse 5, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. Remembering that the term elder is an official office rather than somebody of old age. This may be addressing those who are the newly qualified elders, that is the younger elders, or it may just be addressing the young people in the congregation that they need to submit to God-given authority, an issue that Peter has already addressed earlier in the letter.

But then he goes on to address everybody. So for all of those of you here who are not elders or leaders of some part of God's flock, now is the time to switch on because now he's addressing you as well as those who are elders.

He says at the second half of verse 5, and all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another. Now, in the original Greek language this is a strange expression.

[13 : 18] He's not just talking about clothing yourselves but rather tying yourselves up with humility. The model I think he has is probably of Jesus the night before he died.

Jesus in that upper room before the Last Supper bound a towel or tied a towel around him and washed his disciples' feet. The word's the same, to tie or bind something on you.

It's the tying of an apron of a slave or a servant. That's what humility is about. It's about service of others. Why does Peter exhort them to be humble?

Because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Quoting from the Old Testament but a verse that occurs in other places of the Bible as well.

Pride is opposing God. Pride is saying I don't need God. Pride is saying I can do it for myself. Pride is being self-sufficient. Pride is using one's own resources and not depending on God's resources.

[14 : 28] So in the end pride is opposition to God. No wonder God opposes the proud. They oppose him. But on the other hand we need to know what humility is. Humility is not passive resignation.

It's not sitting back and letting things happen all over us. Nor is it false modesty like Uriah Heep in David Copperfield. Nor is it low self-esteem thinking that we possibly couldn't do anything at all because really we're not very good.

Humility is serving others, counting others better than yourself. Jesus is the model of that so many times in the Bible. But humility towards other people derives from our relationship with God.

Peter goes on in verse 6 to say, Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God. Humility comes from our relationship to God, fundamentally. The mighty hand of God is God's act to save people.

It's a standard expression in the Old Testament for God saving his people. So to humble yourself under the mighty hand of God is to stand empty handed before God and saying, I need you to save me.

[15 : 37] I cannot save myself. I cannot bring myself to heaven through my own achievements or resources. I need you God. That's humility under the mighty hand of God.

Pride, you see, dismisses God's offer of salvation. Pride says, God, I can do it myself. God helps those who help themselves, so I'll help myself, thank you very much. I'll achieve it. Humility recognizes the truth that we can't and offers empty hands to the mighty hand of God.

But the promise, Peter says, is that at the end of time or in due time, God will exalt the humble. Humbled now for a season but exalted for eternity in heaven.

I know which I'd choose. Well, an indication of humility is how we deal with anxieties and worries. I remember a very silly Monty Python song some years ago that said as a chorus line, I'm so worried about the baggage retrieval system they've got at Heathrow.

I wonder how many of you have spent sleepless nights worrying about the baggage retrieval system they've got at Heathrow. Well, I'll be trying it out in a couple of weeks, but I must say I'm not really that worried about it.

[16:57] But the song went on and on with lines like that about stupid trivial things that people are worried about. Now, even though the song was silly, it reflected the truth of our world.

It's a worrying world. We worry about all sorts of things. We worry about our kids, our parents. We worry about our job, the weather, the sport. If you're a Sydney supporter, you've got lots to worry about.

Peter says, cast all your anxiety on God because he cares for you.

No exceptions there. All your anxiety. Not some things, all things. If you cling to anxiety, you see, you sin.

If you cling to anxiety, you're demonstrating pride. You're saying, well, I'm going to control this situation. I'm going to worry about it. I'm going to dominate it with my worry and my endeavours to solve it.

[17:57] Humility casts cares on God knowing that he cares for you. So if you are exercising anxiety or worry about anything in your life, stop and give it to God.

Now, when we exercise anxieties, I think one of two things are happening. Either we're demonstrating our concern for worldly issues or we're reflecting a lack of faith in God.

Let me demonstrate an example. In a few weeks' time, I have to give a paper at a conference. And I've realised in preparing this sermon for today how worried I am by it.

But I've also realised why I'm worried about it. I'm worried about this paper because I'm proud. I don't want to do a bad paper and people think stupid things about me.

So it's a worldly concern, is my anxiety for that conference. Now, if your anxieties or concerns are like that, it's a worldly issue and it doesn't matter in the end.

[19:01] You're reflecting a wrong priority in your life. So stop. It doesn't mean be carefree and irresponsible. It doesn't mean that I shouldn't prepare my paper and just turn up at the conference and say whatever first things come into my mouth.

It means work hard, do your best, but don't worry, don't be anxious about it. Now, the second alternative is that our anxieties reflect a lack of faith in God.

We may be worried about whether we're going to get to heaven. Well, trust God's promises that if you place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and repent of your sins, you are guaranteed a place in heaven.

Trust God's promises. It may be that we're worried about a bad situation in our life, ill health or grief or lack of job or some situation that seems very difficult.

God promises that he will work all things for good for those who love him. So don't worry. Trust God. You see, there's no cause for anxiety.

[20:06] Cast all your anxieties on him for he cares for you. Challenging. But there is no excuse for anybody to exercise anxiety or worry.

Because God cares for you. He's not indifferent for you. No other religion could say that about their God. Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism can't. But the Bible tells us that God cares for you.

What an extraordinary statement about God. that he cares for each and every one of us individually. But the Bible's full of statements about that. About God's care for each of us as individuals.

That's why we can cast our cares on him. Not because he's sort of like a great big ogre that's created this world, wound it up like a watch and now sits back and lets it tick away. No, not at all.

That's not a biblical view of God. God cares for you. He cares for each one of you in every aspect of your life. And because he's got a mighty hand, because he's powerful and all loving, you can cast your cares on him.

[21 : 14] Because he's able to deal with things. He promises you that he will provide everything that you need now in this life and for eternity. So why worry? Why be anxious? Our world tells us there are lots of things to be anxious about, but in the end, for eternity, there aren't.

Because God is powerful and loving and he cares for you. So don't be anxious. Don't worry. Cast your cares on him. For Peter's readers, this would have had a sharp focus for their lives.

They were facing persecution from the Roman Empire. Some of them were perhaps facing death. And tradition has it that Peter himself died at the hands of Nero soon after this letter was written.

They had every reason to be anxious and worried about their future. Their worries must have been much greater than ours. But Peter says, even in the midst of that difficult situation, cast your anxieties on him for he cares for you.

Doesn't look like it in a persecuted Roman Empire, but he does for eternity. Trust him. In the context of persecution, Peter goes on to say, discipline yourselves in verse 8.

[22 : 31] That is, be sober. Keep alert. That is, be awake. Why? Because like a roaring lion, your adversary, the devil, prowls around looking for someone to devour. The opposition that these Christians are facing is spiritual opposition.

In the end, not just people, not just the local mayor or the local Roman official or policeman. It is a spiritual enmity exercised by the devil who's depicted here as a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour.

Some lions keep their mouths shut and keep quiet to stalk their prey. Other lions do actually roar so that they'll paralyze with fear their opposition and then devour them. This is the devil at work seeking to destroy Christian people.

And Peter's advice to them is be alert, be watchful and resist. Stand firm in your faith. Not fight back. That's a stupid thing to do.

Not to fear him, but have faith. Not to underestimate the devil either, as people this century in the church have done probably. Nor to rely on your own strength, but stand firm in Christian faith.

[23 : 44] Why? Because Jesus' death and resurrection have conquered the devil and evil for all time. The mopping up operation is still going on. The difference between D-Day in the Second World War and V-E-Day in the Second World War.

The enemy is very active in between the two, but the decisive battle has been fought on the cross and God has won. So stand firm in that faith and victory is yours against the devil. Well, this letter has been a huge encouragement, no doubt, to suffering and persecuted Christian people.

Peter sums up what he says in what I guess is the climax of this letter in verse 10. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you.

Peter is saying your trials and difficulties are temporary. A little while. It doesn't look a little while for the Roman Empire and its persecution of Christian people, but on the eternal time scale it's just a little dot in the middle somewhere.

It's a little while. But the God of all grace has called you to eternal glory, never-ending glory. What an imbalance compared to the little while of suffering and trial and persecution.

[25 : 07] If you were to weigh them on the scales, it would be heavily towards the eternal glory because it goes on and on and on, perfectly, forever. What an encouragement to people facing persecution.

To remind them of the hope they can have because of the victory of Jesus Christ. It's easy in the Christian life, especially when you're facing opposition, to feel the strength waning, faith flagging.

Peter promises that God of all grace here will restore, support, strengthen and establish you. Four synonyms, they all mean roughly the same sort of thing.

But Peter uses four, not just one, because he wants to underline and make emphatic what God will do. For those Christians who are suffering and under trial in this life, God will lift you up, he'll restore you, give you strength, give you courage, set you on a firm foundation, all of those things God will do.

You see, in the end, our future depends on God, not us. On his hold on us, not us on his. On his strength, not ours. On his mighty hand, not ours. What an encouragement to people who are struggling in their faith.

[26 : 25] But also remember that Peter's words are born of personal experience as well. Everything he encourages, the Christians to do in this chapter, he has failed to do in his life.

Peter says, be alert, keep alert. But Peter failed to do that in the garden of Gethsemane when Jesus said to him, be watchful and pray. No, he didn't. He fell asleep.

Peter says, be humble. But Peter had proudly boasted that he would never deny Jesus. And he did three times. Peter says, resist the devil standing firm in your faith.

But Peter told Jesus he was not dying on a cross and Jesus said to him, get behind me, Satan. Time and again, in each of these things, Peter had failed. He'd failed to be a shepherd of the sheep.

He'd failed to keep watchful. He'd failed to resist the devil. He'd failed to be humble. And what had God done with him? The God of all grace had restored him, supported him, strengthened him and established him.

[27 : 40] Had restored him when Jesus on the beach after the resurrection said to him three times, Peter, feed my sheep, feed my lambs, feed my flock. Three times to counter each of the three denials of Jesus. Restored by the God of all grace.

He'd supported him by giving him courage, filling him with the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost. He'd strengthened him, making him firm by the gospel that Peter was given and entrusted to preach.

And he'd established him as the rock on a firm foundation of faith in Jesus Christ. Past failures mended, past failures forgiven.

Peter knows what it's like to receive the God of all grace's restoration and support and strengthening and establishment. Peter has been reinstated by the God of all grace.

For that's what God is like today as then. The God of all grace who forgives, who corrects, who mends, who restores, who supports, who strengthens and establishes us firm in faith.

[28 : 37] His grace, the God of all grace, his grace is sufficient for us. No wonder Peter goes on in verse 11 to praise him. He can't stop himself. To him, to God, the God of all grace, be the power forever and ever.

Amen.