**The Delectable Mountains**

Text: 1 Peter 5:1-4

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**Scriptures:** Ezekiel 34:11-16; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; John 10:11-15

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] ‘Behold our God’, 183, 87b, 470, 206

**Series:** The Pilgrims Progress (#11)

**Theme:** The character and role of the elders in shepherding the local church.

**Proposition:** As the Elders minister to us, the Lord is pleased to use them to help grow us in Christ.

**Introduction**

The first part of John Bunyan’s book ‘The Pilgrims Progress’ follows the journey of the character ‘Christian’ from The City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Christian makes progress towards His final heavenly destination as he passes through a series of places including The Interpreter’s House, The Hill Difficulty, The Valley of the Shadow of Death, Vanity Fair and Doubting Castle.

The Pilgrims Progress is **more than an outward journey** through different experiences in the Christian life, it is also an inward progress in knowledge, maturity, godliness and faith. We see this clearly as the character Christian comes to the ‘Delectable Mountains’. ‘Delectable’ means ‘*very attractive, highly pleasing, immensely delightful, extremely delicious, highly desirable*’. Do you remember the Palace Beautiful where Christian was encouraged, comforted, and equipped for spiritual battle? This hospitable home is a picture of the local church where, as Bunyan describes it, Christian had blessed fellowship with the characters Watchful, Discretion, Prudence, Piety, and Charity.

It was from the top of the Palace Beautiful that Christian could see in the distance the ‘Delectable Mountains’. These mountains, Bunyan describes as being “Immanuel’s Land” – ‘*a most pleasant mountainous country, beautified with woods, vineyards, fruits of all sorts, flowers, springs and fountains*’. Bunyan describes how the pilgrims Christian and Hopeful, having escaped from Doubting Castle, *‘drank and washed themselves and did eat freely of the vineyards’* in this blessed land.

When they were on top of these mountains, they saw shepherds feeding their flocks. The names of these shepherds are Knowledge, Experience, Watchful and Sincere – representing the multiple elders who the Lord appoints to serve His people the local church. The names of the shepherds in Bunyan’s book reflect some of the necessary character qualities of elders that are revealed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The Greek word (presbuteros) translated ‘elders’ in our text (1 Peter 5:1) is the term from which we derive the English word ‘Presbyter’.

Like all Presbyterian churches did historically, Reformed Churches are overseen by multiple elders, following the clear pattern of Scripture. This is reflected in Article 30 of the Belgic Confession which helpfully states “*There should be minsters or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church*”.

In The Pilgrims Progress, the shepherding elders minister to Christian and Hopeful by showing them the hills called Error, Caution and Clear, together with a door on the side of another hill. This morning as we focus on the character and ministry of the elders in a local church we’ll do so under four points that match the names of the elders in Bunyan’s book:

1. The knowledgeable shepherd
2. The experienced shepherd
3. The watchful shepherd
4. The sincere shepherd
5. **The knowledgeable shepherd**

Do you remember how Christian was questioned by those in the Palace Beautiful before being welcomed into the house? This is pattern is repeated by the Shepherds at the Delectable Mountains who asked the pilgrims a number of questions about their journey. Bunyan writes that when the Shepherds heard the answers that the pilgrims gave to their questions, they were pleased, ‘looked lovingly upon them and said ‘welcome to the Delectable Mountains’. This mirrors entry into full church membership for believers who come and make a local church their spiritual home. The Shepherds then invited the pilgrims to ‘*stay here awhile to be acquainted with us, and yet more to solace (comfort) yourselves with the good of these Delectable Mountains*’. The pilgrims were to be blessed by the ministry of the elders in this representation of a local church.

After a good night’s rest, the Shepherds showed Christian and Hopeful a very steep hill called Error, at the bottom of which were several men ‘*dashed all to pieces by a fall that they had from the top*’. The knowledgeable Shepherds informed the pilgrims that these men were named Hymenaeus and Philetus. Here Bunyan makes reference to the words of Paul to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:16-18 “*But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some*”.

The elders in a local church are called to ‘shepherd the flock of God that is among you’ and this includes warning the congregation of the dangers; both of useless disputes about minor matters and of following false teaching in major matters. In the case of Hymenaeus and Philetus, they were spreading the (gnostic) lie that the future general resurrection of Christians had already happened in the form of a spiritual resurrection at conversion. This is a serious doctrinal error against which the shepherds warned the pilgrims.

In our Reformed Churches, office-bearers (elders, deacons and ministers) are required to sign the ‘form of subscription’. By doing so office-bearers promise to ‘*teach diligently and to defend faithfully*’ the truth of the Bible as summarised in four historical documents: The Belgic and Westminster Confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. In order to do this, elders, deacons and ministers need to be knowledgeable both about Scripture and about our confessional documents. They also need to be experienced, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The experienced shepherd**

The next place the Shepherds take the pilgrims to is another hill – called ‘Caution’. From there they could see several men walking up and down among tombs. Being blind they were unable to get out from that graveyard. Here Bunyan makes reference to Proverbs 21:16 “*One who wanders from the way of good sense will rest in the assembly of the dead*”. The Shepherds explain that these men had had their eyes put out by Giant Despair at Doubting Castle, having foolishly taken the by-path meadow way. The same one that Christian and Hopeful had also followed for a while. Bunyan writes that ‘*Christian and Hopeful looked one upon another with tears gushing out, but yet said nothing to the Shepherds*’. The pilgrims were deeply affected as they recognised that only the grace of God had kept them from the fate of the blind men who were stuck in ‘the assembly of the dead’.

As I reflect on my own life and my own years of church ministry I see how the grace of God has preserved me, despite what, at times have been unwise decisions that have led me astray for a while. Can you relate to this in your own life? Can you also testify to the preserving grace of God in your own journey of faith as a Christian? Have you ever been brought to tears by the kindness and love of the Good Shepherd who has restored your soul, led you in paths of righteousness and comforted you with His gentle, but firm rod and staff?

Bunyan masterfully presents the Delectable Mountains as being an image of the local church from the point of view of more mature believers. From the top of these mountains, the pilgrims have a wider view and can see with more clarity both their own weakness and also the preserving strength of their Lord. This is in contrast to the less mature perspective that they had from the Palace Beautiful from where they could only see these mountains in the distance.

As they journeyed, the pilgrims progressed as they grew spiritually. Paul wrote wisely to the younger man Timothy: “*Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress*” (1 Tim 4:12-15). Interestingly, the Greek word translated ‘progress’ here describes not merely moving ahead, but doing so against obstacles, dangers and distractions. It conveys the idea of ‘blazing a trail’ like an explorer hacking a path through dense bush so that others can follow behind. Young Timothy was to grow in experience as He served in the church.

So it is for men who are called to the office of elder, deacon or pastor. If they were required to be fully experienced, no man could ever serve in a first term of office! Yet Scripture does reveal that an elder must not be ‘*a recent convert*’ (1 Tim 3:6). Elders are to have experience of following Christ so that they can warn the flock of danger, just as the shepherds who taught the pilgrims did at the hills called Error and Caution. As experienced believers, elders are called to ‘*be examples to the flock*’ who can repeat to others the words of the Apostle Paul “*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*” (1 Cor 11:1). They are also to be watchful, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The watchful shepherd**

The elders are the spiritual watchmen’ over the local church who ‘*exercise oversight*’ (1 Pet 5:2). The Greek word translated ‘exercise oversight’ literally means one who looks over closely or intently, who views carefully. In Latin the equivalent term is ‘super-visus’ from which the English word ‘supervisor’ is derived. Elders are to keep watch over the local church congregation they serve, but also over themselves (1 Tim 4:6). Office-bearers, like all Christians, are sinner saved by grace who always need to take heed for themselves the warnings of Scripture about others who have fallen away.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about the Old Testament Israelites who grumbled against the Lord and ‘*were destroyed by the Destroyer*’ (1 Cor 10:10). Paul warns ‘*Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*’ (1 Cor 10:11-12).

Elders are especially called to watch over themselves as they watch over others, ‘*not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*’ (1 Pet 5:). John Bunyan describes how the Shepherds showed the pilgrims a door in the side of a hill. As they opened the door they saw a dark and smoky place with the scent of brimstone. The Shepherds described this as a ‘by-way of hell’ – a way that hypocrites such as sell their birthright like Esau, sell their Master like Judas or blaspheme the gospel like Alexander or that lie like Ananias and Sapphira his wife.

Part of the task of elders, as experienced watchmen, is to warn the congregation of spiritual dangers. At times this may mean admonition, rebuke or even excommunication with the aims of (Church Order Art 67):

1. Vindicating the honour of the Lord
2. Maintaining the purity of the church and
3. Promoting the welfare of the believer in the hope that they will see their error, repent and return to the Lord

When people ‘stand watch’ on a ship, looking out for dangers ahead so that the people in the vessel are protected from danger, they ‘keep watch’ for a period before standing down for rest. So it is in our Reformed Churches that we practice what is called ‘term eldership’ (and also ‘term deaconship’). Ordinarily men serve for a three-year term before having a break. Being a watchful shepherd is wonderfully rewarding, encouraging work at times, but it can also be wearying.

The Scriptures call us all, as part of this local church, to: “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*” (Heb 13:17). Elders are to be knowledgeable in the Word, experienced in walking with the Lord, watchful over themselves and their flock and also sincere, which brings us to our final point:

1. **The sincere shepherd**

To be sincere is to be free from pretence or deceit. A sincere shepherd wholeheartedly tends to his flock. This necessary sincerity is expressed in our text in the words of verse 2: “*Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly*”. Paul writes to the Corinthians about his sincerity, together with that of Timothy in these words:“*we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly* ***sincerity****, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you*” (2 Cor 1:12); “*we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of* ***sincerity****, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ*” (2 Cor 2:17). The Greek word translated ‘sincerity’ describes that which is free from spot or blemish so that it can bear examination in the full splendour of the sun.

This is the same idea as is conveyed in the Biblical qualification for an elder who must be ‘*above reproach*’ (1 Tim 3:2). This does not mean a man must be perfect to serve as an elder. There is insufficiency in all people, with the exception of Christ. Being ‘above reproach’ means that no charge laid against an elder should justly be sustained. The sincerity of elders is seen in their desire to help others grow in faith as they walk in Christ. John Bunyan describes this as he writes “*by this time the pilgrims had a desire to go forwards and the Shepherds a desire that they should; so they walked together towards the end of the mountains*”.

On the high hill called ‘Clear’ the shepherds gave the pilgrims a ‘perspective-glass’ (like a telescope) so that they could look at the Celestial City. This glorious city was still in the distance, but closer than it had been when they were at the Palace Beautiful. Still remembering the ‘by-way to hell’ into which some had fallen, the pilgrim’s hands shook when they held the telescope so that they could not look steadily through it. Here Bunyan pastorally portrays the reality that the reminder of remaining sin and conviction of past sins can impede our view of the glory of eternal life in Christ.

Though we look intently through the lens of God's Word at the realities of this life and eternal life to come, our view, this side of glory, is somewhat clouded. The Apostle Paul describes it this way “*for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). Though Christian and Hopeful could not see as clearly as they would like, yet they continue their gaze and gained a glimpse of the glory of the Celestial City. A vital part of the ministry of the elders is to help us to see, through the lens of God’s Word, the glory of Christ and His Kingdom so that we are sustained as we travel upwards on the narrow hard way that leads to life (Matt 7:14).

The focus of this sermon has been particularly on the elders as shepherd’s over God’s flock in the local church. The elders serve as ‘under-shepherds’ who serve Christ, the chief Shepherd, from whom they will receive the honour of the ‘*unfading crown of glory*’ (1 Pet 5:4). The hospitable, loving ministry of Bunyan’s shepherd’s at the Delectable Mountains not only points to the work of elders in the local church, but ultimately to Christ, the Chief Shepherd. He is the fulfilment of the prophesy in Ezekiel 34:

1. *“Behold I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out” (v11).*
2. *“I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered” (v12).*
3. *“I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land” (v14).*

It is very much in the ‘Delectable Mountains’, that is in the local church, where Christ feeds His people the spiritual food that we need to live (Deut 8:3).

**Christ is the Good Shepherd** who has laid down His own life for His sheep (John 10:11).

He is **The knowledgeable Shepherd** – full of grace and truth (John 1:14), beloved of the Father (Mat 3:17), in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3)

He is **The experienced Shepherd** who has walked this pilgrim path. He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, having been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15).

He is **The watchful Shepherd** who, unlike a hired hand, protects His sheep with His own life (John 10:12-13). He knows His own sheep and His own know Him.

He is **The sincere Shepherd** who is without spot or blemish, perfect in all His Ways. His heart is completely pure.

Through the ministry of church elders and others, Christ ‘*gathers, protects and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith*’ (HCLD21A54). Today Jesus invites you to look through the lens of Scripture and to see His glory and the glory of His Kingdom.

When you look out from this local church, from these Delectable Mountains, using the Word of God to guide your gaze, what do you see? Perhaps you see nothing, because your eyes have been blinded by the god of this world so that you cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4)? Friend, do not be like those at the bottom of the hill called Error, who remain in the assembly of the dead. Instead come to Christ in repentance and faith and live!

Perhaps you see Christ and His glory, but dimly because like the pilgrims Christian and Hopeful, you are reminded of your past sins and you still struggle with the old nature within? Brothers and sisters, be encouraged to continue on your journey, trusting in the Lord to guide you. Knowing that the day is surely coming when you will see your Lord and Saviour face to face.

The church is beautiful, delectable!, when we, the living stones from which she is constructed, reflect the glory of our Lord being mindful to avoid the errors of those who have gone astray and keeping our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus. He is the Good Shepherd, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2).

AMEN.