

Shepherdology 101
 Lesson Four

Before getting into the theology of shepherding, we have considered **Three Fundamentals**.

Fundamental 1: Jesus, Our Lord

Fundamental 2: Jesus’ Word, Our Effective Guide

Fundamental 3: Jesus, Our Model Shepherd

So far, we have identified five specific benefits for those who study what the Bible says about shepherding.

	Summary	Benefit for Studying Shepherdology
Introduction	Jesus longs for shepherds who can minister to distressed and dispirited sheep.	❶
Fundamental One	In all things, including what shepherds do, Jesus knows and decides what must be done.	❷
		❸
Fundamental Two	God’s word clearly teaches us what we need to know about shepherds and how God will work accordingly.	❹
Fundamental Three	Jesus is the perfect example of a good shepherd.	❺

IV. The Need for Shepherds

God's people need shepherds!

Salvation itself involves coming to our Shepherd: "For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (1 Peter 2:25).

But not just any shepherd will do!

"Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, "Thus says the Lord God, 'Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them. They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered'"'" (Ezekiel 34:1-5).

How realistic is it to hope for shepherds who are capable of following Jesus' example?

The prophet Jeremiah caught a glimpse of it: "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15).

The day Jeremiah foresaw dawned when Jesus ascended from the mount called Olivet.

Here is Paul's action report of what happened far above the heavens: "When He ascended on high, / He led captive a host of captives, / And He gave gifts to men. ... And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors [shepherds] and teachers" (Ephesians 4:8, 11).

Paul provides a glimpse into how these gifts are distributed in something he says to the elders of Ephesus.

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

It was Paul’s customary practice to appoint elders in newly planted local churches (Acts 14:23).

Father’s Gift Distribution Plan

When Paul came to Ephesus and planted a church, the Holy Spirit took some gifts from the storeroom and dispensed them just as Paul recounts.

This perfectly answers to Jesus’ prayer request in Matthew 9:38.

The Father, Son, and Spirit are making sure that gifts of good shepherds are provided wherever the flock is found. They give precisely what is needed.

God’s gifts need to be used in ways that align with the heart and guidance of the giver.

God’s gifts can be neglected (1 Timothy 4:14) or ignored (2 Timothy 1:6).

We must be good stewards of God’s gifts and use them in ways that His word indicates will optimize their positive impact on others (1 Peter 4:10).

Summary: The Father, Son, and Spirit have given the gift of good shepherds to Jesus’ church.

Benefit: Study Shepherdology so you can...

V. The Development of Elders

To understand how shepherds came to be part of local church leadership, we will trace the development of elders as an institution of the local church. Think of this as the “origin story” of local church shepherds.

A. First Appearance of “Elders”

1. In Israel

“Go and gather the elders” (Exodus 3:16).

Boaz met with ten elders to secure a legal ruling (Ruth 4:2).

“The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people, / ‘It is you who have devoured the vineyard; / The plunder of the poor is in your houses. / What do you mean by crushing My people / And grinding the face of the poor?’ / Declares the Lord God of hosts” (Isaiah 3:14–15).

“Then some elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, ‘Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?’” (Ezekiel 14:1–3).

The elders of Israel in the time of Jesus represented a very powerful and influential group focused on questioning and condemning any who threatened their position and influence. Elders such as these would definitely not be an asset to Jesus’ church.

2. In the Church

Surprise! We first encounter “elders” in the church at Jerusalem: “And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders” (Acts 11:30).

A plurality of elders can be seen in a positive light in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4; 21:18), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), and the churches of the diaspora (James 5:14).

We are left to conclude:

But make no mistake; what these elders of Israel were and what Jesus intends for men of His church are worlds apart.

B. Normative Presence of Elders

1. Instituted

“After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:21–23).

“Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen” (1 Peter 1:1).

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1).

2. Prescribed

Paul directed Titus: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

3. Valued

When shepherds equip the flock, the saints effectively do the work of ministry and the body of Christ comes into its own (Ephesians 4:11-12).

When the right kind of elders are actively ministering in churches, the saints are fed and grow; such men also neutralize influences that could work their harm (Titus 1:9-11).

Elders are capable of ministering healing and restoration (James 5:15).

Elders provide the saints with a positive illustration of what it means to follow Jesus (1 Peter 5:3).

As the saints respond well to such leaders, the saints promote their own good (Hebrews 13:17).

Summary: Most glimpses of elders in the Old Testament and in the Gospels are decidedly negative. In striking contrast to their Old Testament counterparts, New Testament elders bring a robust set of positive ministry skills to bear on the spiritual welfare of a people.

They are difference makers. The welfare of a church will be hobbled by their absence.

Paul's Prediction: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:28–30).

Implication: Elders can be a tremendous asset. But it is entirely possible for elders to turn to the dark side.

Benefit: Studying what the Bible says about shepherding can

	Summary	Benefit for Studying Shepherdology
Introduction	Jesus longs for shepherds who can minister to distressed and dispirited sheep.	❶ Give a gift to Jesus that is just what He yearns for.
Fundamental One	In all things, including what shepherds do, Jesus knows and decides what must be done.	❷ Do what is wise in the present.
		❸ Do what Jesus will commend when He returns.
Fundamental Two	God’s word clearly teaches us what we need to know about shepherds and how God will work accordingly.	❹ Access divine power that produces remarkable and enduring results.
Fundamental Three	Jesus is the perfect example of a good shepherd.	❺ Benefit from the greatest shepherding mentor of all time.
Need	The Father, Son, and Spirit have given the gift of good shepherds to Jesus’ church.	❻
Origin	Shepherds are an essential asset to Jesus’ church, when they are good shepherds.	❼

VI. Key Passages That Relate to Shepherds/Overseers/Leaders/Elders

There are ten New Testament passages that represent the mother lode of biblical truth regarding local church leaders. Each of these passages goes beyond incidental reference. It is important to know the reference and understand the basic content of each of these ten passages. It is also worth noting the various titles for elders that are used interchangeably in some of these verses.

From these ten passages, we can discern terms and statements that help us understand six topics: (1) what shepherds do, (2) the specific skills they employ, (3) their necessary qualifications, (4) how they are most effective, (5) how flock members should view them, and (6) their reward for faithful service. Think of these ten passages as the key source for information on these six topics. Not all six topics are considered in every passage, but some passages yield information for more than one topic. First we will get a bird's-eye view of all ten passages. Then we will look closely at what can be learned from these passages pertinent to six specific categories of shepherd information.

A. The Last Word: Acts 20:17–35

Acts 20:17–35 captures what Paul assumed would be his last words of instruction to the elders of Ephesus. Paul was on the return leg of his third missionary journey and intended to arrive in Jerusalem by Pentecost. To stay on track, he did not stop at Ephesus but sailed to Miletus, about thirty miles south of Ephesus. From there, he summoned the Ephesian elders to rendezvous with him.

Paul first came to Ephesus perhaps as early as AD 52. This meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus may have occurred as late as the first few months of AD 57. This means that Paul was speaking to leaders of a church that was, at most, only four or five years old. Luke has given us a fairly detailed summary of Paul's instruction to the elders of this young church.

There are three main sections to Paul's message. First he reminds these leaders how he approached ministry during his extended season among them (Acts 20:18–21). Then, he outlines what he is soon to face in Jerusalem and how he has spiritually prepared himself accordingly (Acts 20:22–27). Lastly, he instructs these elders how to shepherd well as they address some serious external and internal threats (Acts 20:28–35). Note that in this last section, Paul connects his instruction to the elders to his own example. He calls the elders to adopt the approach to ministry that they have observed in him during his season among them.

Based on this observation, the entirety of Paul's message to the Ephesian elders, including the biographical section, is intended to give elders guidance in how to shepherd the flock of God well. This address is rich with instruction about the responsibilities of shepherds:

"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them, 'You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ'" (Acts 20:17–21).

"And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face. Therefore, I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God'" (Acts 20:22–27).

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:28–35).

B. Gifts Unwrapped: Ephesians 4:11–13

Paul wrote Ephesians in the early 60s, perhaps three or four years after he met with the Ephesian elders in Miletus. In Ephesians 4:11–13, Paul explains the purpose behind Jesus’ gift of leaders to His church. The apostle’s brief statement mentions “pastors” (ποιμῆν, ποιμήν) using a term that is translated “shepherds” in every other appearance in the New Testament. Shepherds are included among a larger group that includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers. The members of this group all share a core purpose: to equip the saints for the work of ministry. This description helps us understand a primary responsibility of shepherds.

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11–13).

C. Leaders Valued: 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

The earliest work of Paul found in the Bible was probably written from Corinth not long after the apostle planted a remarkable church in Thessalonica. His letter includes an appeal for the brethren to promote a harmonious working relationship with their leaders. This request also gives us insight into what local church leaders do.

“But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13).

D. What a Church Needs: 1 Timothy 3:1–7

An excerpt from Paul’s first letter to Timothy addresses a profound need for an established church. Paul first ministered in Ephesus as early as AD 52. Since 1 Timothy was written between AD 63 and AD 66, the Ephesian church would be about ten years old by this time. Paul’s concerns voiced in Miletus about five years earlier have come to pass. This church is being threatened on a number of fronts.

Paul's younger ministry partner, Timothy, was stationed in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3) to help this people get it right (1 Timothy 3:15). Based on Acts 20:17, we know that elders had already been serving in this church for years. But Paul wants Timothy to make sure he is populating his elder team with men who will make a difference. The detailed list of virtues in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 specifies the essential qualities of such men. This passage shouts, "Character matters!"

"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1 Timothy 3:1–7).

E. The Good, the Bad, and the Hasty: 1 Timothy 5:17–22

Later in his letter to Timothy, Paul provides some procedural guidance that answers to the warning he first gave in Miletus. Paul predicted this: "And from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). So in 1 Timothy 5:17–22, Paul spells out how to honor elders who do well and how to deal with those who don't.

In this passage, we gain insight into what elders do, how a congregation should value them, and the appropriate procedures by which to recognize some and, as appropriate, censure others.

"The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,' and 'The laborer is worthy of his wages.' Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality. Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin" (1 Timothy 5:17–22).

F. What a Church Under Attack Needs: Titus 1:5–16

Since Titus was written after the events recorded in Acts, we are left to build a relevant chronology from clues within the book itself. Apparently, Paul and Titus ministered together for a season establishing churches on the island of Crete. Then Paul departed and left Titus to carry the work forward until such time as he was relieved by Artemas or Tychicus (Titus 1:5; 3:12).

Paul indicated that the appointment of elders who match a specific profile is of vital importance to these churches in Crete. False teachers were having considerable adverse impact on the saints and must be stopped. Men of character and devotion to the word are key. This passage lists the necessary qualifications for elders (1:5–9) and outlines how such men (and Titus) can address the threat posed by these false teachers (1:10–16).

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:5–9).

“For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’ This testimony is true. For this reason reprove them severely so that they may be sound in the faith, not paying attention to Jewish myths and commandments of men who turn away from the truth. To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled. They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed” (Titus 1:10–16).

G. Remember and Imitate: Hebrews 13:7

Having demonstrated the supremacy of Christ in chapters 1–12, the author of Hebrews devotes his final chapter to more pastoral concerns. In Hebrews 13:7, he affirms that the character and teaching of church leaders makes them

eminently suitable to be remembered and for their faith to be imitated. This verse identifies a core responsibility of local church leaders and calls those led to respond to their leaders in two specific ways.

“Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7).

H. Joy for Leaders, Benefits for Saints: Hebrews 13:17

According to Hebrews 13:17, it’s a win-win situation when a congregation is positively responsive to its leaders. When a leader’s job is a joy, his flock will be served well. Hebrews 13:17 explains how the sheep should respond to their leaders and provides insight into what those leaders do.

“Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17).

I. Prayer of Faith: James 5:14–15

James, Jesus’ half-brother, is the most likely author of this little book, which is rich with practical wisdom about faith that works. In James 5:14–15, James exhorts the one who is sick to call for the elders and enjoins the elders to pray accordingly. Remarkably, the specific ministry by local church elders identified in this passage can be a catalyst for healing and restoration.

“Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (James 5:14–15).

J. Shepherding Well: 1 Peter 5:1–4

The book of 1 Peter is a word of encouragement and assurance for saints under fire in Asia Minor. In chapter 5, Peter addresses the elders of their churches. His exhortation echoes what the resurrected Jesus once said to him, “Shepherd My sheep” (John 21:16). In the center of this passage are three pairs in which a positive and negative are linked. Peter identifies three ways not to shepherd and three contrasting ways to shepherd well. He closes by identifying the reward for those who do the latter.

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:1–4).

Summary

It is essential to understand what God specifically says about elders. His instruction is clear and sufficient. What we need to know is captured in these ten passages: Acts 20:17–35; Ephesians 4:11–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–22; Titus 1:5–16; Hebrews 13:7, 17; James 5:14–15; 1 Peter 5:1–4. When someone teaches something about local church leaders that contradicts what is taught in these passages, that someone got it wrong.

Think of these ten passages as our essential data source for understanding what we will call local church shepherds. These ten passages provide information that can be organized into categories. Each major section to follow addresses one question:

- Essential Function. What is the core responsibility of these leaders?
- Specific Responsibilities. What skills do shepherds use?
- Qualifications. What are the qualifications for shepherds?
- Manner. How do shepherds best fulfill their responsibilities?
- Response. How can the flock receive maximum benefit from its shepherds?
- Reward. How will good shepherds be rewarded?

Discussion Guide

Discussion Question: Jesus’ earthly mission was a shepherd’s task. In what specific ways do the duties of a shepherd describe what Jesus accomplished in His first advent? In other words, what did Jesus do that reflects what a shepherd does? What do you see in the Good Shepherd that encourages you? Inspires you? Humbles you? Challenges you?

Discussion Question: Read these words from Paul: “But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father” (Philippians 2:19–22). Although the word “shepherd” is not used of Timothy in this passage, in what ways does Timothy reflect qualities that Jesus demonstrated as a good shepherd? Recall an experience from your past in which someone was a “Timothy” for you?

Discussion Question: In John 10:1–18, Jesus identifies other characters who stand in stark contrast to a good shepherd, namely the thief, robber, stranger, hired hand, and wolf. What would be defining characteristics of each of these negative examples? For example, when a shepherd behaves like a “hired hand,” what would that look like?

Discussion Question: Who from your past has demonstrated himself/herself as a good model of Jesus’ approach to shepherding? Describe your situation and what someone did that echoed Jesus’ example of what a good shepherd does.

Discussion Question: As you consider your personal life, what are the chief hindrances to you becoming an answer to Jesus’ prayer request?

Study Questions

Here are seven of twenty questions that can be used to evaluate your mastery of the content from Shepherdology 101.

1. What kind of laborers does Jesus want us to ask the Lord of the Harvest to supply? How do you know your answer is correct?
2. How does the fact that Jesus is Lord of the church relate to the question of understanding what shepherds do?
3. Explain what is meant by the sufficiency, necessity, and clarity of God's word. What single statement captures the essence of all three?
4. How do the sufficiency, necessity, and clarity of God's word relate to the study of shepherdology?
5. What advantages are associated with a word-driven practice of shepherding?
6. Name at least three characteristics Jesus associates with a good shepherd in John 10.
7. In what way is the conversation reported in John 21:15–17 related to shepherds of Jesus' church today? What passage is key to your answer?