

# The Shepherd - the Stone of Israel

by Alexander Maclaren

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*The sermon highlights the significance of three names - Mighty God of Jacob, Shepherd, and Stone of Israel - as symbols of God's strength, guidance, and protection, emphasizing the importance of trusting in Him as our refuge.*

**Scripture:** Genesis 49:24

**Topics:** "God's Faithfulness", "Personal Relationship with God"

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## Description

Alexander Maclaren expounds on the profound names of God as revealed by Jacob, emphasizing the Mighty God of Jacob, the Shepherd, and the Stone of Israel. He illustrates how Jacob's reflections on God's faithfulness throughout his life culminate in a deep personal relationship with God, who is both a protector and a source of strength. Maclaren encourages believers to recognize God's active presence in their lives and to embrace the personal bond they share with Him. The sermon highlights the importance of seeing God as a refuge and a solid foundation, drawing parallels between Jacob's experiences and the believer's journey today.

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## Transcript

A SLIGHT alteration in the rendering will probably bring out the meaning of these words more correctly. The last two clauses should perhaps not be read as a separate sentence. Striking out the supplement "is," and letting the previous sentence run on to the end of the verse, we get a series of names of God, in apposition with each other, as the sources of the strength promised to the arms of the hands of the warlike sons of Joseph. From the hands of the mighty God of Jacob—from thence, from the Shepherd, the stone of Israel—the power will come for conflict and for conquest. This exuberant heaping together of names of God is the mark of the flash of rapturous confidence which lit up the dying man's thoughts when he turned to God.

When he begins to think of Him he cannot stay his tongue. So many aspects of His character, so many remembrances of His deeds come crowding into his mind; so familiar and so dear are they that he must linger over the words and strive by this triple repetition to express the manifold preciousness of Him whom no name, nor crowd of names, can rightly praise. So earthly love ever does with its earthly objects, inventing and reiterating epithets which are caresses. Such repetitions are not tautologies for each utters some new aspect of the one subject and comes from a new gush of heart's love toward it. And something of the same rapture and unwearied recurrence to the Name that is above every name should mark the

communion of devout souls with their heavenly Love.

What a wonderful burst of such praise flowed out from David's thankful heart in his day of deliverance like some strong current with its sevenfold wave, each crested with the Name! "The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer: my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower."

These three names which we find here are striking and beautiful in themselves, in their juxtaposition, in their use on Jacob's lips. They seem to have been all coined by him for, if we accept this song as a true prophecy uttered by him, we have here the earliest instance of their occurrence. They have all a history and appear again expanded and deepened in the subsequent Revelation. Let us look at them as they stand.

### 1. The Mighty God of Jacob

The meaning of such a name is clear enough. It is He who has shown Himself mighty and mine by His deeds for me all through my life. The dying man's thoughts are busy with all that past from the day when he went forth from the tent of Isaac and took of the stones of the field for his pillow when the sun went down. A perplexed history it had been with many a bitter sorrow and many a yet bitterer sin. Passionate grief and despairing murmurs he had felt and flung out while it slowly unfolded itself. When the Pharaoh had asked, "How old art thou?" he had answered in words which owe their somberness partly to obsequious assumption of insignificance in such a presence, but have a strong tinge of genuine sadness in them too: "Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been." But lying dying there with it all well behind him, he has become wiser; and now it looks to him as one long showing forth of the might of his God who had been with him all his life long and had redeemed him from all evil. He has got far enough away to see the lie of the land as he could not do while he was toiling along the road. The barren rocks and white snow glow with purple as the setting sun touches them. The struggles with Laban; the fear of Esau; the weary work of toilsome years; the sad day when Rachel died and left him the "son of her sorrow"; the heart sickness of the long years of Joseph's loss--all have faded away or been changed into thankful wonder at God's guidance. The one thought which the dying man carries out of life with him is: God has shown Himself mighty, and He has shown Himself mine.

For each of us, our own experience should be a revelation of God. The things about Him which we read in the Bible are never living and real to us till we have verified them in the facts of our own history. Many a word lies on the page or in our memories, fully believed and utterly shadowy until in some soul's conflict we have had to grasp it and found it true. Only so much of our creed as we have proved in life is really ours. If we will only open our eyes and reflect upon our history as it passes before us, we shall find every comer of it filled with the manifestations to our hearts and to our minds of a present God. But our folly, our stupidity, our impatience, our absorption with the mere outsides of things, our self-will blind us to the Angel with the drawn sword who resists us as well as to the Angel, with the lily who would lead us. So we waste our days, are deaf to His voice speaking through all the clatter of tongues, and are blind to His bright presence shining through all the dimness of earth; and, for far too many of us, we never can see God in the present but only discern Him when He has passed by like Moses from his cleft. Like this same Jacob, we have to say: "Surely God was in this place, and I knew it not." Hence we miss the educational worth of our lives; are tortured with needless cares; are beaten by the poorest adversaries; and grope amid what seems to us a chaos of pathless perplexities when we might be marching on assured and strong with God for our guide and the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob for our defense.

Notice, too, how distinctly the thought comes out in this name—that the very vital center of a man's religion is his conviction that God is his. He will not be content with thinking of God as the God of his fathers; he will not even be content with associating himself with them in the common possession; but he must feel the full force of the intensely personal bond that knits him to God and God to him. Of course such a feeling does not ignore the blessed fellowship and family who also are held in this bond. The God of Jacob is to the patriarch also the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob. But that comes second, and this comes first. Each man for himself must put forth the hand of his own faith and grasp that great hand for his own guide. "My Lord and my God" is the true form of the confession. "He loved me and gave Himself for me" is the shape in which the Gospel of Christ melts the soul. God is mine because His love individualizes me, and I have a distinct place in His heart, His purposes, and His deeds. God is mine because by my own individual act—the most personal which I can perform -- I cast myself on Him; by my faith I appropriate the common salvation and open my being to the inflow of His power. God is mine, and I am His in that wonderful mutual possession with perpetual interchange of giving and receiving not only gifts but selves which makes the very life of love, whether it be love on earth or love in heaven.

Remember, too, the profound use which our Lord made of this name wherein the man claims to possess God. Because Moses at the bush called God the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, they cannot have ceased to be. The personal relations which subsist between God and the soul that clasps Him for its own demand an immortal life for their adequate expression and make it impossible that death's skeleton fingers should have power to untie such a bond. Anything is conceivable rather than that the soul which can say "God is mine" should perish. And that continued existence demands, too, a state of being which shall correspond to itself in which its powers shall all be exercised, its desires fulfilled, its possibilities made facts. Therefore there must be "the resurrection." "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He hath prepared for them a city."

The dying patriarch left to his descendants the legacy of this great name, and often, in later times, it was used to quicken faith by the remembrance of the great deeds of God in the past. One instance may serve as a sample of the whole. "The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge." The first of these two names lays the foundation of our confidence in the thought of the boundless power of Him whom all the forces of the universe, personal and impersonal, angels and stars in their marshaled order, obey and serve. The second bids later generations claim as theirs all that the old history reveals as having belonged to the "world's gray fathers." They had no special prerogative of nearness or of possession. The arm that guided them is unwearied, and all the past is true still and will forevermore be true for all who love God. So the venerable name is full of promise and of hope for us: "the God of Jacob is our refuge."

## 2. The Shepherd

How that name sums up the lessons that Jacob had learned from the work of himself and of his sons! "Thy servants are shepherds," they said to Pharaoh; "both we, and also our sons." For fourteen long weary years he had toiled at that task. "In the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes." And his own sleepless vigilance and patient endurance seem to him to be but shadows of the loving care, the watchful protection, the strong defense which "the God, who has been my Shepherd all my life long" had extended to him and his. Long before the shepherd king, who had been taken from the sheepcotes to rule over Israel, sang his immortal psalm, the same occupation had suggested the same thought to the shepherd patriarch. Happy they whose daily work may picture for them some aspect of God's care—or rather, happy they whose eyes are open to see the dim likeness of God's care which every man's earthly relations, and some part of his work, most certainly present.

There can be no need to draw out at length the thoughts which that sweet and familiar emblem has conveyed to so many generations. Loving care, wise guidance, fitting food are promised by it; and docile submission, close following at the Shepherd's heels, patience, innocence, meekness, trust are required. But I may emphasize for a moment the connection between the thought of "the mighty God of Jacob" and that of "the Shepherd." The occupation, as we see it, does not call for a strong arm or much courage except now and then to wade through snow-drifts and dig out the buried and half-dead creature. But the shepherds whom Jacob knew had to be hardy, bold fighters. There were marauders lurking ready to sweep away a weakly guarded flock. There were wild beasts in the gorges of the hills. There was danger in the sun by day on these burning plains, and in the night the wolves prowled around the flock.

We remember how David's earliest exploits were against the lion and the bear, and how he felt that even his duel with the Philistine bully was not more formidable than these had been. If we will read into our English notions of a shepherd this element of danger and of daring, we shall feel that these two clauses are not to be taken as giving the contrasted ideas of strength and gentleness, but the connected ones of strength and therefore protection and security. We have the same connection in later echoes of this name. "Behold, the Lord God shall come with strong hand; He shall feed His flock like a shepherd,."

And our Lord's use of the figure brings into all but exclusive prominence the good shepherd's conflict with the ravening wolves--a conflict in which he must not hesitate even "to lay down his life for the sheep." As long as the flock are here, amid dangers, and foes, and wild weather, the arm that guides must be an arm that guards; and none less mighty than the Mighty One of Jacob can be the Shepherd of men. But a higher fulfillment yet awaits this venerable emblem when in other pastures, where no lion nor any ravening beast shall come, the "Lamb, which is in the midst of the throne," and is Shepherd as well as Lamb, "shall feed them, and lead them by living fountains of waters."

### 3. The Stone of Israel

Here, again, we have a name that after-ages have caught up and cherished used for the first time. I suppose the Stone of Israel means much the same thing as the Rock. If so, that symbol, too, which is full of such large meanings was coined by Jacob. It is, perhaps, not fanciful to suppose that it owes its origin to the scenery of Palestine. The wild cliffs of the eastern region where Peniel lay or the savage fastnesses in the southern wilderness, a day's march from Hebron, where he lived so long came back to his memory amid the flat, clay land of Egypt; and their towering height, their immovable firmness, their cool shade, their safe shelter spoke to him of the unalterable might and impregnable defense which he had found in God. So there is in this name the same devout, reflective laying-hold upon experience which we have observed in the preceding.

There is also the same individualizing grasp of God as his very own for "Israel" here is, of course, to be taken not as the name of the nation but as his own name, and the intention of the phrase is evidently to express what God had been to him personally.

The general idea of this symbol is perhaps firmness, solidity. And that general idea may be followed out in various details. God is a rock for a foundation. Build your lives, your thoughts, your efforts, your hopes there. The house founded on the rock will stand though wind and rain from above smite it, and floods from beneath beat on it like battering-rams. God is a rock for a fortress. Flee to Him to hide, and your defense shall be the "munitions of rocks" which shall laugh to scorn all assault and never be stormed by any foe. God is a rock for shade and refreshment. Come close to Him from out of the scorching heat, and you will

find coolness and verdure and moisture in the clefts when all outside that grateful shadow is parched and dry.

The word of the dying Jacob was caught up by the great lawgiver in his dying song. "Ascribe ye greatness to our God. He is the Rock." It reappears in the last words of the shepherd king whose grand prophetic picture of the true King is heralded by "The Rock of Israel spoke to me." It is heard once more from the lips of the greatest of the prophets in his glowing prophecy of the song of the final days: "Trust ye in the Lord forever; for in the Lord Jehovah is the Rock of Ages," as well as in his solemn prophecy of the Stone which God would lay in Zion. We hear it again from the lips that cannot lie. "Did ye never read in the Scriptures, The Stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head-stone of the comer?" And for the last time the venerable metaphor which has cheered so many ages appears in the words of that Apostle who was "surnamed Cephas, which is by interpretation a stone." "To whom coming as unto a living stone, ye also as living stones are built up." As on some rocky site in Palestine where a thousand generations in succession have made their fortresses, one may see stones laid with the bevel that tells of early Jewish masonry, and above them Roman work, and higher still masonry of crusading times, and above it the building of today; so we, each age in our turn, build on this great rock foundation, dwell safe there for our little lives, and are laid to peaceful rest in a sepulcher in the rock On Christ we may build. In Him we may dwell and rest secure. We may die in Jesus and be gathered to our own people who, having died, live in Him. And though so many generations have reared their dwellings on that great rock, there is ample room for us, too, to build. We have not to content ourselves with an uncertain foundation among the shifting rubbish of perished dwellings but can get down to the firm virgin rock for ourselves. None that have ever built there have been confounded. We clasp hands with all who have gone before us. At one end of the long chain this dim figure of the dying Jacob, amid the strange vanished life of Egypt, stretches out his withered hands to God the stone of Israel; at the other end, we lift up ours to Jesus, and cry:

Rock of Ages! cleft for me, Let me hide myself in Thee.

The faith is one. One will be the answer and the reward. May it be yours and mine!

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