

THE LORD OUR SHEPHERD

J. Douglas MacMillan

*Second edition
Revised and enlarged*



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PRESS**

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This book contains the substance of a series of addresses delivered at the Annual Conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales at Aberystwyth in 1979. In this second edition, the addresses are preceded by the author's personal testimony.

Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the Authorised (King James) version.

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Foreword

TO write a commendation for a book that has been reprinted six times in the last fifteen years may seem superfluous. But its appearance in a new edition and the potential of a new readership makes the task not only appropriate but also necessary. For these and other reasons—a cherished friendship with its author among them—I am grateful to the Publishers for the invitation to write this Foreword and undertake the duty gladly.

The main part of this little book contains four sermons on Psalm 23. They were first preached at the annual conference of the Evangelical Movement of Wales in 1979 by the late Revd J. Douglas MacMillan, and published four years later under the title of *The Lord our Shepherd*. In his Foreword to that edition, the Revd Elwyn Davies, the General Secretary of the Movement, recalled how ‘the congregation [had] listened spellbound’ to those sermons.

Since then, many more have come to appreciate them—over 45,000 copies of that edition have been sold. In addition, it has been translated into Romanian, Spanish and Portuguese. (Audio-tapes of those addresses are still available from the Publisher of this volume.)

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the name of Douglas MacMillan became identified for many, not only within the United Kingdom but in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada, with a rare form of preaching—one marked by a powerful originality and a strong orthodoxy. These addresses on Psalm 23 are probably the clearest examples of this rare combination.

Their originality

As is well known, it was a shepherd who composed Psalm 23—hence all the imagery that it contains. The same is true with regard to these addresses. Their preacher—author spent twelve years of his life as a shepherd on the Ardnamurchan peninsula in Argyll, the most westerly part of the Scottish mainland. He knew what it was like to be out on its hills in all weathers and at all hours, caring for sheep. That day-to-day experience contributes to the uniqueness of these addresses in no small measure. But it does not wholly explain their originality.

Neither his shepherding nor his familiarity with the text of this psalm provided Douglas MacMillan with an entrance into that wonderful relationship with the Lord which is described in it. Something else was needed, and it was his being made aware that although he knew what was involved in looking after sheep, he needed a shepherd himself because he had wandered far from the fold. Born to godly parents, prayed for and brought up under the sound of the gospel, Psalm 23 was well known to him in Gaelic as well as English; but he did not know the Shepherd. How this came about is told in the early part of his testimony, whose inclusion in this volume greatly enhances the spiritual value of this book.

Also recorded there is how an earnest and caring undershepherd sought and ‘penned’ him—of which more later. But it was his being found by the Lord that made all the difference to him, and to his view of this Psalm. That is what makes these addresses so original. Many have preached on Psalm 23 without ever having had to look for sheep until they are found and then having to carry them all the way home. That experience gave a tangible immediacy—and it comes out so clearly in the many illustrations contained in these addresses—to his having been personally sought, found and cared for by the Good Shepherd.

Their orthodoxy

But if that is their origin, what explains their rich orthodoxy? There is more here than personal reflections on a shepherd's life in the light of a newly found Saviour. Revd MacMillan writes: 'When I came to know the Lord, I think that he drew me to [the shepherd] theme in Scripture, and I was able to interpret much of the Lord's dealings with myself from my own experience among sheep.'

These addresses are therefore the fruit of some three years of communion with Christ, the Chief Shepherd, in the light of the whole of Scripture. That laid the foundation for the eight years of serious study by way of preparation for the work of the Christian ministry, and the accurate and lively proclamation of the Word which followed it. Significantly, Douglas MacMillan said: 'I think that I had been preaching for eighteen years before I went anywhere near Psalm 23 in a pulpit'—that must mean that Psalm 23 was for him something like holy ground.

These addresses are the fruit of careful exegesis and sound theology, but they are also messages of life to Christian people. They follow the bone structure of the psalm, which is a 'he-me' relationship between the Lord and every one of his people. They also transmit its lifeblood, namely, that of being known by him and knowing him; and they identify its sinews, which are the ways in which the Shepherd cares for his own.

Here is wonderful trinitarian redemptive theology coupled with profound pastoral theology. It is no wonder that the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland appointed him to the Chair of Church History and Church Principles in 1982, after his pastorates at Aberdeen (1966–74) and Glasgow (1974–82). It was a just recognition of the need that its ministerial students might 'catch' something of that rare combination of truth and life, knowledge of Scripture truth and also of people, which he embodied, and which cannot really be taught.

He underwent major heart surgery in 1990 but recovered well. But on 3 August 1991 he was called home, just as he was about to return to pastoral ministry, which was probably his first love. On 9 August, the ‘young preacher’ to whom he refers in his testimony spoke at his funeral service in Kilchoan, Argyll. For some time previously, the Revd David Patterson had been in considerable turmoil as to what he should say to those who would gather, many of whom, he knew, were companions of Douglas in his pre-conversion days. But as he relived the close fellowship that the two of them had enjoyed over the years, a few words darted into his mind, as if from Douglas himself. They were, ‘Davie, just tell them that he kept me.’ That was the theme around which the message was tellingly constructed. It is, of course, where the psalm ends: ‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.’

What Asaph said about David at the end of Psalm 78 comes to mind as being also true of Revd Professor J. Douglas MacMillan as an under-shepherd of David’s greater son:

He chose David also his servant, and took him from the sheepfolds: from following the ewes great with young he brought him to feed Jacob his people, and Israel his inheritance. So he fed them according to the integrity of his heart; and guided them by the skilfulness of his hands.

HYWEL R JONES

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II. Addresses on Psalm 23

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want:
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

My soul He doth restore again,
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
E'en for His own Name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear none ill;
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.

My table Thou hast furnishèd
In presence of my foes;
My head Thou dost with oil anoint,
And my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house for evermore
My dwelling-place shall be.

Scottish Psalter, 1650

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The ‘Shepherd’ theme

‘The LORD is my shepherd’

(Psalm 23:1)

I have felt led of the Lord, I believe, to take as our theme for this conference one that we find very broadly scattered through Scripture. It is the ‘Shepherd’ theme—God as the Shepherd of his flock, and the Christian believers as the sheep of his flock. I would like to focus our studies in that theme, of course, on the twenty-third psalm. This psalm is the one that naturally comes to mind when we think of God as the Shepherd of his people, or of believers as his sheep. I am sure there are few portions of God’s Word more familiar to every Christian believer. Six verses only, and yet I would guess that they are amongst the best-known verses of Scripture.

Now the very fact that we are focusing our thinking on the theme of ‘God the Shepherd of his people’, and on a portion of Scripture so familiar and so well-loved, constitutes, I think, a great difficulty for the preacher, and possibly for the hearer too; because, you see, you already know this psalm, and immediately a preacher announces that he is going to preach from it, you say, ‘Well, what on earth can he say about Psalm 23 that I don’t know already?’ Let me say at the outset, I can say very little about Psalm 23 that you don’t know already. I have to confess that.

So that is the difficulty. And I think there is a further difficulty for any preacher approaching a part of God’s Word that is very

well-loved, and that has already been owned and blessed of the Lord in most lives here present. Any preacher who is going to handle a portion of Scripture that God has made precious is very conscious that, in doing so, he may well bruise and hurt what is already precious.

Difficulties ... and helps

Now I realise all these dangers. I have been deeply conscious of them in preparing for this conference, and I think I have been conscious of them ever since I began preaching. I think I had been preaching for eighteen years before I ever went anywhere near Psalm 23 in a pulpit. I have been preaching for twenty-two years now, and I still wish that I could preach and tell people what I find in this psalm.

So I recognise the difficulty that the preacher faces in speaking from a passage like this. And I recognise your difficulties too. You don't want to have your precious things taken out and handled by a rough, rude fellow from Scotland, and some of your most cherished ideas perhaps knocked a little bit askew.

But if there are difficulties, then I think too that there are helps. I think, for example, that although I am a stranger to most of you, the very fact that I am handling and dealing with something that you are familiar with will help you to relax. And you will concentrate, I hope, not on the man who is preaching, but upon what the man is saying. So that's a help.

Then, you see, if you know not only the psalm but the Shepherd of the psalm, that gives me a real link with you, doesn't it? And that makes it much easier. It means that I can relax when I am preaching too—and if there is one thing I hate, it is trying to preach when I am tense and nervous! So I hope that the Lord, as we gather around this very familiar part of the Word, will allow you to relax and to look at himself, and allow me to relax as I try and lead our thoughts.