

DEO Talk at District Ritual Meeting Further Symbolism of the Entered Apprentice Degree

As we continue to focus on the importance of the Entered Apprentice Degree, we should remember that when we approached the altar and freely took the obligation, we assumed new duties and responsibilities, and solemnly bound ourselves to a new course in life. Given the importance of that occasion and that action, let us again reflect for a few minutes on the symbolism of this part our first Degree in Masonry

“You were caused to kneel at the altar:”

The central piece of furniture in the Lodge is the altar. Just as a temple symbolizes the presence of Deity, so the altar, by its position in the center of our Lodge, symbolizes the importance the Supreme Architect has in Freemasonry, and the importance He should have in our life.

It is also a symbol of our faith in God. The candidate approaches the altar in search of Light and assumes his Obligations there. In the presence of God and his Brethren, he offers himself to the service of the Supreme Architect of the Universe and to mankind in general. So the altar is the point on which our life in Masonic Lodge is focused, and it should be accorded the utmost respect.

We are also taught that the Worshipful Master is to be guided by the Holy Writings, which are the great light in Masonry, and which will guide him to all truth. And so as a symbol that the wisdom of the Master flows from the altar to his station in the East, one should never cross between the Master’s station and the altar when a Lodge is convened.

“You were placed in due form to receive your obligation”

The taking of the Entered Apprentice Obligation is visible and audible evidence of the candidate's sincerity of purpose.

As with other Masonic symbols, the roots of this practice are ancient. Making vows was common in the ancient world where many would make promises in return for safe voyages, successful crops, healing, and so on. Indeed, the Latin word *obligato* literally signifies a tying or binding. In ancient times the vow often defined an individual's relationship with the deities of his homeland. And given how important these vows and obligations were considered, it is not surprising that there were terrible penalties for breaking them.

Today the nature of making vows and obligations has changed, but vows and obligations still remain a very powerful vehicle for setting direction in one's life and for building one's character. And like the ancient vows and obligations, the Entered Apprentice obligation, freely entered into by the candidate, is at the heart of the Entered Apprentice degree. For when it is assumed by the candidate, he has solemnly bound himself to Freemasonry and to his Brethren, and has assumed certain duties and responsibilities toward both, which are his to keep for the rest of his life. The relationship between the Obligation and the cable tow, and the maturing nature of this relationship as the candidate progresses in Masonry and in Masonic study, is a subject we all should think about.

In addition to the fraternal ties or bonds that he assumes, the candidate promises not to reveal the modes of recognition and symbolic instruction. The ancient symbolic penalties are retained in our ritual to impress upon the mind of each brother how seriously a violation will be regarded by members of the fraternity.

Of course, they are only symbolic, and apart from the shame a Brother should feel should he ignore his obligations or break his vows, the only penalties which

Freemasonry imposes for violations of its tenets and regulations are Reprimand, Suspension and Expulsion.

The Three Great Lights of Masonry

The Three Great Lights of Masonry are the Holy Bible, Square, and Compass. The Volume of the Sacred Law is an indispensable part of the furniture of a Lodge. In the United States, all Grand Lodges use the Holy Bible as the Volume of the Sacred Law on their altars. But here in Virginia, as in other jurisdictions, a candidate may request to have his own sacred book present on the altar along with the Bible during his degree ceremonies. In other countries, other sacred texts are placed on the altar in place of the Holy Bible.

The open Bible signifies that we should regulate our conduct according to its tenets and teachings, as it is the rule and guide of our faith and is a symbol of man's acknowledgment of his relation to Deity.

The square is a symbol of morality, truthfulness, and honesty. To "*act on the square*" is to act honestly. The compass signifies the favorable use of action and is a symbol of restraint, skill, and knowledge. We might also properly regard the compass as excluding all that is harmful or unworthy beyond its circle. The general public recognizes the square and compasses as the symbol of Freemasonry.

The symbolism of the square and compasses is seen in many ancient carvings and artworks. A stonecutter's square has been seen to represent the earth, while the compasses were related to the arc of heaven. Thus, their union is symbolic of the union of heaven and earth.

The Volume of Sacred Law can also represent God's communication to man through scripture and revelation. The Volume of Sacred Law combined with the

united square and compasses can be seen as representing God's expression through the creation of heaven and earth.

The Three Great Lights are also consistent with the three-tier system of Ancient Craft Masonry. One way of interpreting the triple symbolism is seeing human nature as divided into three parts—body, intellect, and soul—with a degree for each part. In the same way, the Three Great Lights can be viewed as the guiding principles of the three natures: the square for the body, the compass for the intellect, and the Volume of Sacred Law for the soul.

“You were presented a lambskin, or white leather apron.”

You were informed that the apron is an emblem of innocence and the badge of a Free and Accepted Mason. Here the term “innocence” is meant to symbolize clean thinking and clean living, a loyal obedience to the laws of the Craft, and a sincere goodwill toward one's Brethren. The “Badge of a Mason” signifies, among other things, that Masons are workers and builders.

The apron as a mark of distinction has been found in many initiating rituals of ancient organizations and has been conspicuous on statues of some Egyptian and Greek deities. Indeed, the word candidate comes from the Latin *candidatus*, which means “clothed in white.”

The lamb has always been a symbol of innocence and sacrifice. Thus its symbolic use has been to signify innocence in the sense of being free from moral defect.

But innocence and sacrifice also has been used in another sense of sacrificing our old views and being newly born. Thus, the candidate goes from an uninitiated state to becoming a Brother Mason.

“You were asked to deposit something of a mineral or metallic nature.”

The symbolism of the act of deposit is called the Rite of Destitution. This Rite refers to those ancient times when men believed that the planets determined human fate and controlled human passions, and that there were metals by which each planet was itself controlled. In ancient initiations, candidates were compelled to leave all metals behind, lest they bring into the assembly disturbing planetary influences. The Rite of Destitution symbolizes that the candidate is not to bring his passions or prejudices into the Lodge room, lest harmony, one of the chief concerns of Masonry, be destroyed. For Masons, it has the added significance of reinforcing the principle that one Mason helps another and that those in need can count on their Brethren for needed assistance.

“You were placed in the northeast corner of the Lodge.”

The northeast corner is traditionally the place where the cornerstone or first stone of a building is laid. The Entered Apprentice is placed there to symbolize his first steps into Freemasonry and the hope that by keeping true to the moral principles of Freemasonry he will be enabled to erect his own spiritual moral temple.

The north in Masonry is attributed to darkness and the east to light. Therefore, the northeast is a place midway between darkness and light as he travels from being a candidate to becoming a Master Mason. Being midway, it is also symbolic of equilibrium. This spot can also represent the Spring Equinox, where the length of the nighttime is equal to the length of the daytime.

There is evidence in some jurisdictions that the lambskin apron was presented to the candidate at one time in the northeast corner of the Lodge, with the symbolism of the apron pointing to the candidate going from an uninitiated state to becoming a Brother Mason and the symbolism of the northeast corner pointing to his continued progression toward great light and greater understanding.

Let me close by suggesting how important the symbolism of the Degree of Entered Apprentice is in helping us to orient our lives toward the new obligations we have entered into. And note also how it helps us to understand how Freemasonry can assist us to better focus our lives, and reach an equilibrium that appropriately balances our duties to the Supreme Architect of the Universe, to our families, our brethren, and our fellowman.