

## **Teachings of the Master Mason Degree and Our Journey Right Worshipful Malcolm R. Holley, Jr.**

When we contemplate the turmoil in the world around us and especially during times of turmoil in our own lives, we seek ways to understand what is happening and ways to deal with the day to day challenges we face.

When we begin our journey to be a Master Mason, we enter upon a path that will increase our understanding and assist us in dealing with these challenges. From the time we take that first step in Masonry, we begin to learn about the Fraternity – its history, philosophy, and traditions, but more especially its moral teachings and their relevance to our daily life. As we approach the third step, that of becoming a Master Mason, some may consider the journey coming to an end, but the fact is that we have just begun.

Our journey to become a Master Mason should have taught us to seek further Light, or knowledge. This knowledge is not only about the allegories, teachings, and lessons in our ritual, but about the integration of all of this into our thoughts and actions in order that we may improve ourselves and become better men, husbands, fathers, neighbors, and friends.

Although the symbols in our ritual can be interpreted in many ways, and it is up to each of us to find its meaning in our own lives, it may be useful to explore how some have interpreted the teachings of our Fraternity.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEGREE**

The Master Mason's Degree is the culmination of all that we have been taught in the two preceding ceremonies. We depart from the symbolism of the two preceding Degrees, which focused on architecture and the sciences and had the Lodge as the symbol of the world. In the Degree of Master Mason, we are exposed to a more profound wisdom as we focus on the spiritual aspects of life and death.

At the conclusion of this Degree, we receive the designation of Master Mason, but very few of us are truly Masters of our Craft, and we should maintain a healthy deference for this exalted status. In fact, it takes much more effort and study, and a great deal of practice to really earn that title. We should not be satisfied with merely receiving the degrees. Rather, we see them as no more than the first steps toward the Light, and the beginning of a life-long journey to improve ourselves in Masonry and to improve ourselves as moral and spiritual beings. This is the purpose and ideal of our Fraternity.

Being "Raised to the Sublime Degree" is the appropriate terminology. Sublime is defined as being exalted or elevated so as to inspire awe and wonder. It also means to undergo sublimation that, like distillation, requires a volatilization of a substance that rises and reforms at a higher level. The significance of this degree is that we are urged to cast off our imperfections and through the practice of the virtues taught in the degrees to rise to our maximum potential.

## **SCRIPTURE OF THE MASTER MASON'S DEGREE**

With the delivery of the scripture of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 12, Verses 1 through 7, we begin the lessons that are taught and reemphasized throughout the degree. This passage of scripture begins with an admonishment to reflect on our Creator and remember our duties in the days of our youth, looking to God for grace and strength. We should do this early, while the body is strong and the spirit active. When a man has the pain of reviewing a misspent life, his not having given up sin and worldly vanities till he is forced to say, I have no pleasure in them, renders his sincerity very questionable. The verses 2 through 5 give a figurative description of old age and its many infirmities. Verse 6 notices the circumstances that take place in the hour of death.

## **THE WAGES OF A MASTER MASON**

Our ancient, operative Brethren performed manual labor and received wages which would contribute to their physical welfare. These nominal wages were corn (wheat), wine, and oil. The wages of a **speculative** Mason, however, must come from within, as he is concerned more with moral rather than physical labor. The rewards of love, compassion, friendship, and brotherhood are the wages of a Master Mason. We do not always work hard enough to earn our Master's wages, and we are constantly reminded to do so whenever a Lodge is opened.

## **TRAVELING IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES**

The goal of our ancient operative Brethren was to become masters, so they might possess those secrets or skills that would

enable them to practice the art of the master architect, no matter where they traveled, even in foreign countries.

The term “foreign countries” is used symbolically in speculative Masonry, and does not refer to a certain geographical location. Indeed, Freemasonry itself is a foreign country to those not initiated into its rites. To fully appreciate and enjoy the privileges of the Craft, we each must become familiar with the territory of Freemasonry by learning its language, customs, and history and stretch our minds to try to interpret symbols that can teach us important moral lessons. Once raised, a worthy Master Mason must continue his journey to understand the principles of the Craft and continue to search for Light and truth wherever they may be found.

The term “foreign countries” also may be considered a metaphor for the spiritual worlds. The ancients concerned themselves with vast spiritual worlds, and their method of gaining admission through various spiritual spheres was through secret passwords, grips, signs, and sometimes angelic names, and holy words.

## **THE LOST WORD**

Having the power of speech is perhaps the noblest attribute of man, because he can communicate his thoughts to his fellows. The utterance of the Word is closely connected with the idea of Light, and therefore, knowledge. The true Word has been carried down through the ages as being synonymous with every manifestation of power and truth. We must always search diligently for truth, and never permit prejudice, passions, or conflicts of interest to hinder us in our search.

We must keep our minds open to receiving truth from any source, both within the Fraternity and without.

The search for “that which was lost” is not necessarily a search for a particular word. In the Craft Lodges, there is a substitute for the true Word. Our search is a symbol for our feeling of loss or self-imposed exile from the Divine, and the search is ultimately for truth. Thus, each initiate must ultimately seek out and find the true Word for himself, through his own individual efforts.

### **LOW TWELVE**

In ancient symbolism, the number 12 denoted completion. There are many examples – such as the 12 signs of the zodiac being a complete circle, the 12 edges of the cube being a symbol of the earth, and the 12 months which complete the year. The number twelve also signified fulfillment of a deed, and was therefore an emblem of human action and life. High Twelve corresponds to noon, with the sun at its zenith, while Low Twelve denotes midnight, deemed the blackest time of the night.

### **THE BEE HIVE**

We were taught in the Degree of Master Mason that the bee hive is an emblem of industry and that we should ever be industrious, as we are rational and intelligent beings. The lessons of the bee hive have particular applicability as we travel on our journey toward more Light or knowledge, and as we deal with the day to day circumstances of life.

We were taught that we should endeavor to add to the stock of knowledge and practical philanthropy, else we might be deemed a “Drone in the Hive of Nature” and unworthy of respect as a Master Mason. We also were taught that man is ever dependent on his fellowman, and this dependence is one of the strongest bonds of society and of our Fraternity.

### **THE HOUR-GLASS**

The hour-glass was emblematical of Human Life. This symbol expounded on how rapidly life passes away, just as the sand particles pass and are soon exhausted. When combined with the lesson of the bee hive, we are further admonished to always be industrious, for life passes all too quickly. As Master Masons, we each should endeavor to be knowledgeable and educated, both about our Fraternity and the world in which we live.

### **THE THREE STEPS**

We also learned in the Degree of Master Mason about the three steps, emblematical of the three stages of life: youth, manhood and old age, as well as the three degrees of Freemasonry. We were taught that we should be industrious in our attainment of useful knowledge in our youth, apply that knowledge in manhood in the discharge of our duties to God, our neighbors and ourselves. Finally, in old age, we can enjoy the reflections of a well-spent life.

If we ascribe to the thought that our journey through life requires life-long learning, then the three steps become a symbolic map for our progress from youth to old age.

## **SUMMARY**

The Degree of Master Mason is filled with many lessons on both an intellectual and a spiritual level. We should continually reflect on these lessons in the interactions we have with the individuals we meet. We should ask ourselves daily, “Am I living up to the obligations I took as a Master Mason?”

If we keep firmly in mind the moral teachings of the Fraternity, are ever mindful of the obligations we assumed, which mark our status as Master Masons, then we will live our life so as to be an example to the community at large of what Freemasonry is and how a Master Mason acts. Thus, the journey we began as we knocked on the door of a Lodge will have continued throughout our lives, and we will have learned how to become better men and to discover our true potential.

**Written by Bro. Malcolm R. Holley, Jr., PDDGM**

Credits:

Master Mason Educational Proficiency Manual, Grand Lodge AF & AM of Virginia

Manual of Work, Grand Lodge AF & AM of Virginia

The Master Mason Degree, Grand Lodge F & AM of California