

The Scriptures of the Walking Prayers

by **Worshipful Robert Pagani**

How many of you have come to called meetings? Hopefully, many of you attend and participate in ritual. You have heard the Walking Prayers the Chaplain recites as he precedes the candidate around the symbolic Temple; maybe you are even able to recite most of them. But do you know what they mean? Let's take a look.

The Scriptures used for the circumambulations of the three degrees are figurative and allegorical; especially those used in the Fellowcraft and Master Mason Degrees.

Entered Apprentice - the 133rd Psalm

The Scripture of the Entered Apprentice Degree is a picture of brotherly love:

“Behold, how good and pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garment; as the dew of Hermon and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life forevermore.”

Those are rather odd similes to use to describe the beauties that come from dwelling together in unity. Who was Aaron, and why was oil being poured over him? He was a brother of Moses and the first High Priest under the Mosaic dispensation, and the oil was used to anoint him.

This was the first ceremony of the kind, and evidently so much oil was used that it ran down upon his beard and to the skirts, or hemline, of his clothes. There is some doubt as to where the skirts of his garments might be. It could be near the feet, knees hips, or even at the neck. We have all seen skirts that not only leave the foot area, but are well on their way to the neck.

What is “the dew of Hermon and the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion”? Mount Hermon is north of Jerusalem and is the highest mountain in Syria. The dew that gathers on Hermon is said to be as heavy as a light rain, just like it is on the mountains of Zion. Zion is the high country to the south of Jerusalem, where the City of David was built. Bible interpreters have been puzzled by the reference to the mountains of Zion, as there are no mountains there. They think the reference is to various mountains near Zion.

Dew that condenses gently, imperceptibly, copiously, certainly is symbolic of the qualities that should distinguish our friendship for our Brethren. Dew that evaporates is symbolic of our transitory existence on Earth. Dew certainly is symbolic of the manifold blessings and comforts which God provides in His mysterious way, and which we hope to enjoy through a strict observance of our obligations. May the blessings of Heaven refresh us as the dew does the flower.

“For there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life evermore.” As early as the very first degree, we are taught that life here is not the end of it all, that we don't spend a few moments here and then cease to be. We hear this again in the EA Lecture: Faith, Hope and Charity — that we should have hope in immortality. This is Biblical confirmation of that for which we hope.

Fellowcraft - Amos 7: 7-8

“Thus he showed me: and behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a Plumb Line, with a Plumb Line in his hand. And the Lord said unto me, Amos, what seest thou? And I said a Plumb Line. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a Plumb Line in the midst of my people Israel: I will not again pass by them anymore.”

What does this mean in the context of the Fellowcraft Degree?

Amos was explaining what he'd seen in a vision; the third of four visions that were put into writing and later became part of what is now our Great Light. But what is the interpretation of this vision? What is meant by the Plumb Line? What is its purpose? What did the Lord mean when He said “I will put a Plumb Line in the midst of my people Israel”? What did He mean when He said, “I will not pass by them anymore”? Did He mean that He had been neglecting them and would be making it up to them?

Well, actually no. This is a warning, pure and simple. Amos was predicting the destruction of wicked Israel. The Plumb Line, which doesn't deviate a hair's breadth from perfectly upright, and a wall made by that Plumb Line are both symbolic of the unchanging standard by which God will judge the children of men. He was going to set such a Plumb Line in the middle of His people Israel, by which to judge them. Moreover he would place this standard in their midst, not far off in some other tribe or culture. He would not again pass by them; that is, He had up until then, looked the other way and overlooked their sins, but now it was too late for repentance, and judgment was certain. Isn't there a lesson here that we need to take home? The Plumb Line teaches us how to judge our work, as well as that of others. The Plumb Line is a symbol of rectitude, or righteousness, and finally for all men: Moral Integrity.

Master Mason - Ecclesiastes 12: 1-7

The Scripture of the third degree is the most intriguing of all. There are several interpretations of this Scripture. One of the most popular is that it depicts a severe storm in Palestine, but this seems to be a theory without foundation.

The most widely accepted interpretation is that these verses are a picture of approaching old age and that the various references are to parts of the body. This makes more sense than the storm interpretation, because the Master Mason Degree represents old age. Remember the allegorical progression of the three degrees: Youth, Manhood and Old Age.

Credit has been given to Solomon as the author, but there is grave doubt about that. It's hard to believe that anyone in Solomon's time knew so much about the workings of the human body as they are interpreted by these verses picturing the infirmities of old age.

Let's look at a combination of several interpretations:

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,”

Emphasis is on now. Remember Him now, not tomorrow or next week, but now.

“...while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them”

This is a warning to the youth of approaching old age.

“...while the sun, or the light, or the moon or the stars be not darkened,” This refers to failing eyesight, or it could refer to the ominous darkening of the heavenly bodies that would precede huge evil, or some heavenly disaster.

“nor the clouds return after the rain:”

As soon as one storm stops, another follows; trouble follows trouble in old age. Tears are dried up only to be followed by more weeping, as sorrows and partings increase.

“...in the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble,”

Refers to the legs, and possibly the backbone.

“...and the grinders cease because they are few”

Can be interpreted as the loss of your teeth.

“...and those that look out of the windows be darkened,”

This can be failing eyesight. The eyes look out below the eyelids that open and close like windows.

“and the doors shall be shut in the streets:”

This can be the lips or ears, or both. With teeth gone and the gums shrunken, the lips are closed tightly to keep food from dropping out; or the ears are closed to sound, which would be deafness.

“...when the sound of the grinding is low,”

Grinding of the family's flour was a noisy affair. Loss of hearing in old age would result in this being heard only faintly; also, with the teeth gone and lips tightly closed; the sound of chewing would be faint indeed.

“and he shall rise up at the sound of the bird,”

This is the fitful slumber of age that is disturbed by so slight a noise as the song of a bird, or perhaps the sound of a crowing rooster.

“...and all the daughters of music shall be brought low:”

The vocal cords lose their timber and the ears are no longer attuned to catch musical strains.

“...also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way,”

This applies to a loss of courage to ascend to high places, a loss of courage to attempt to overcome difficulties, or an imagination filled with fear, or failing initiative.

“...and the almond tree shall flourish,”

This is the white hair of age. The almond tree, first to bloom in the spring, blooms on bare limbs, its pink blossoms soon turn white, and the tree looks like the head of an old man.

“...and the grasshopper shall be a burden,”

Such a light thing as a grasshopper becomes a burden; things lightly considered in youth become a burden in old age; there is no longer a youthful agility. Another interpretation has to do with grasshoppers (which are locusts) as food. There is a Biblical reference to locusts and honey. This interpretation would be that common food like the locust is no longer agreeable. One other interpretation is that in old age man has the look of a grasshopper; shriveled, backbone sticking out, knees forward, arms backward, head down and so forth.

“...and desire shall fail;”

The caper berry, which was eaten before meals as an appetizer, will fail to have an effect on a man whose power to enjoy the same is exhausted. The old have no desire for the pleasures of youth. The old no longer enjoy transitory pleasures. The goals set in youth may not have been reached, but one weighted with the burden of years may feel that it's useless to keep trying to achieve them.

All these things will happen because man is about to go to his “long home,” or grave. Remember, these tombs were 6'X6'X5', at a time when men were considerably shorter, so “long home” was clearly distinguishable from physical man or his earthly dwelling.

“...or ever the silver cord be loosed; or the golden bowl be broken; or the pitcher be broken at the fountain,- or the wheel be broken at the cistern.”

One interpretation of the silver cord is that it's a luminous line that connects the soul and the body, kind of like an umbilical cord connects a baby to its mother. A second view of the entire sentence is that the silver cord is either the spinal marrow or the soul; the golden bowl is the head or brain, or the entire body; the pitcher is the heart, or the great vein that brings the blood to the heart, which is symbolized by the fountain and the cistern, or the fountain may be the right ventricle and the cistern the left; the wheel is the aorta or main artery, or it could be the entire respiratory system, or even the nervous system sending messages to and from the mind; or the kidneys, bladder and prostate gland. Whew! Another interpretation, and probably a better one, is that the end of life is signified by the breaking of a lamp, a pitcher and a wheel. The silver cord by which a lamp is suspended is loosed; the golden bowl, or reservoir of oil, is shattered; the oil, representing the spirit of life, is scattered and lost; the pitcher, long used to bring water from the fountain, is shattered, and the same for the wheel, which for so long drew water from the well. With the pitcher and the wheel useless, no more water may be drawn, the vital energies are gone; circulation of the body's blood ceases.

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

After a woeful picture of old age, this allegory finishes with the beautiful and cheering promise of life beyond the grave; with the promise that death is not annihilation. It seems fitting that a Masonic lesson should finish this way:

Brethren, I hope that my talk has been informative and that from now on you'll listen to these Scriptures with greater interest and, hopefully, greater understanding. Thank you for your time.