

WHAT IS MASONRY?

William Douglas

During these times of stress and strain, when men's hearts fail them and they are questioning the reality of even the most sacred things, one sometimes hears the question asked, what is Masonry? And one could in defining Masonry use that familiar phrase from the Constitution which says: Masonry is a system of morality veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols. And it is so often quoted that were it not for its beauty it would become wearisome, or we could use that other familiar phrase Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Then turning to Albert Pike's *Morals and Dogma*, we find this definition—Masonry is the subjugation of the human that is in man by the Divine. The conquest of the appetites and passions, by the moral sense and reason, a continual effort, struggle and warfare of the spiritual against the material and sensual. That victory when it has been secured and achieved the conqueror may rest upon his shield and wear the well-earned laurels.

So much for definitions, if indeed they ought not be called descriptions instead, except the first that is taken from the Book of Constitution. But Masonry is a part or expression of the common spiritual aspiration of mankind to find God, however unique its symbolism may be. One of the charms of Masonry is that it uses the oldest and simplest facts of life to teach its truth. Life has been thought of under many figures of speech, as a battle, a journey, as the building of a house, and asks us to remember that we are builders and must lay firm foundations, testing our work by the square and plumb, and upon these facts Masonry erects its noble and beautiful Allegory of Life. The Lodge is a symbol of the world in which man lives on a checkerboard of nights and days, joys and sorrows, overarched by the sky, at its centre an Altar of Obligation, and prayer.

In the first degree we learn charity. If found worthy we pass in the second degree, out of youth into manhood with its greater responsibilities. And we discover in the third degree that we are citizens of Eternity living in time. Thus, we have pictured a simple allegory of an ideal world ruled by wisdom, strength, and fellowship in which we are placed to build our character and so, initiation is more than a ceremony. It is, in fact, a high hard path which we must walk to know the Truth.

Upon the altar of every lodge at which every Mason takes his vows lies the Volume of the Sacred Law, which is the rule and guide to faith, and is opened when the Lodge is opened, and closed when the Lodge is closed. No business is legal. No initiation is valid, without its Divine guidance. Thus, the Book of Faith rules the Craft in its labors.

None of us can ever forget that first impression when, on being brought to light in Masonry, we discovered upon the altar the open Holy Bible upon which lay the square and compasses and we were exhorted to make that Holy Book the rule of our faith and our guide in the practice of Brotherly Love, Relief, and Truth, and it is by the practice of Brotherly Love and Relief that we learn the Truth and meaning of human life.

In olden times, no man was entrusted with the Truth until he was deemed worthy to receive it. For Truth abused makes for tragedy and disaster. To the truth of the Brotherhood of Man, Masonry adds another, that the Brotherhood of Man depends in the manhood of the Brother. The truth that all men are brothers, if taken alone, leads to sentimentalism. Masonry teaches each of us as a rough ashlar to be squared and polished and made ready for the Temple of Brotherhood, upon which we are to work as brothers and builders. Each workman is not only a builder but himself a living stone, four square, to be built into the whole. Here each finds the worth of his own life, in no other way may we know the meaning of our individual lives, only as we see them in relation to the great purpose of the Master Builder. For it is when we become co-workers with the Eternal that our life reveals its eternal quality and promise.

And as the foundation of our Temple of Fraternity rests upon the reality of the Divine Fatherhood then all men are brothers whether we like it or not. By the fact of a common worship we are bound by a common brotherhood from which we cannot escape. And the golden rule "as ye would that men should do y^e to ye do ye also to them" is the principle by which it may be realized.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son the elder brother was not condemned because he stayed home, but because he was unbrotherly, also the parable of the Good Samaritan the priests were rebuked not because they were priests but because they thought that God stayed in the Temple listening to prayer and song. Whereas, He is out on the rough highways of the world, the unseen companion of every man fallen by the way. His true priest is a despised Samaritan who helped a man regardless of race or religion.

If our fraternal sentiments are to remain, and not fade into mist, their roots must go down to the fact that men are the sons of God and therefore made to be brothers. In the noise and whirl of a busy world, Masonry does not cry aloud and indulge in making programs. It works in a quieter, gentler way, teaching men Brotherly Love, knowing that as the world fills up with men of large heart and kindly hands, so will our dreams of a juster, happier world come true.

Slowly the Temple rises without the sound of axe or hammer, the ideal and goal of the Craft. But what of the Builders? They pass away, passing from time into Eternity. The Temple stands but the Builders fall, generation succeeds generation, each leaving the work unfinished, each workman his mark. Each lays down his working tools and vanishes wearing his little white apron. Each goes alone, no one goes with him Friends and brethren may go with him to the edge of the darkness, but they turn back, and their faces fade.

The Temple rises, but the Builders who shaped its stone on the level and by the square, the multitude of workmen who toiled to make the dream come true, did they die and become more rubbish of the Temple? No: Masonry will not have it so. By the character of God to whose praise and glory the Temple is built and consecrated, by the worth of every man who added his love and labor to its building, by the faith that God is just, Masonry affirms that the Builders are immortal, too. They live as living stones in the Temple.

The Temple and its Ritual are not ends but Divine means to the end, that the humblest workman may be a sanctuary of faith, a shrine of love, an altar of purity and truth. The Temple rises and its builders rise with it sharing its beauty and its prophecy. Such, my Brethren, is the Temple of Masonry. Are we performing our duty and playing our part, true to the obligations we voluntarily assumed at the Sacred Altar, faithful to the trust reposed for the benefit of our country, our fellows and mankind? Or have we treated them as of little importance, or thought of those obligations as only applying to the tiled lodge room, and disregarding them in our dealings with our fellow men in the battle of life? It is not the evening you spend in the lodge room that counts, it is all the other days and evenings in the month, when you associate with your fellow men and endeavor to put into practice the lessons learned in the lodge room, Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth.

You come to the Lodge to learn, you return to the home, to the office, to the street or wherever you may be engaged, to teach by precept and example.

And when your community and the world at large recognises a Mason by his daily walk and conversation, then and only then will Masonry have accomplished its purpose.

Our conviction is strong that in the idealism of Masonry there is something of supreme worth that the world needs today and must have, and to help give these ideals to the world through his own life and character is the supreme responsibility of every Mason.

When destruction befell the city of Pompeii, the people rushed everywhere for safety. Excavators in after years found some bodies in high towers, others in cellars, but where did they find the Roman Guard? Still at the city gate and there, when the Heavens threatened him, there while the earth shook beneath him, there while the lava stream rolled, he stood. There he was found at the post of service, clasping his short Roman sword and there, after a thousand years had passed, he was found true to his trust. Brethren, it is the spirit we put into the service we render to humanity that counts, and when the last call comes for us may we be found like the Roman Guard, at the post of service.

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