



PAPER

The Rite Of Destitution

Summary: An Explanation of the Rite of Destitution within the Ceremony of Initiation.

Nothing in Freemasonry is more beautiful in form or more eloquent in meaning than the First Degree. Its simplicity and dignity, its blend of solemnity and surprise, as well as its beauty of moral truth, mark it as 'a little masterpiece'. Nowhere may one hope to find a more honourable appeal to the natural nobilities of man.

What we get out of Freemasonry, as with everything else, depends upon our capacity and our response to its appeal. Therefore, it is hard to see how any man can receive the First Degree of our Order and pass out of the Lodge Room, quite the same man that entered it. Those precious memories that come flooding back to us when we think of the time when we took our first steps in Freemasonry. We may have been led by friends to expect all sorts of horseplay; but how different it was in reality. Instead of mere play-acting, we discovered by contrast, a ritual of faith and moral law, combined with an allegory of life and a parable of those truths which lie at the foundations of civilised society. Surely no man can ever forget that hour when, clearly or vaguely, the profound meaning of Freemasonry began to unfold in before his mind.

The whole meaning of Initiation is an analogy of birth: the awakening and growth of the soul; its discovery of the purpose of life; and the nature of the world in which it is to be lived. The Lodge Room is the world - as it was thought to be in olden times; with its rectangular surface and its canopy of sky. It also has its radiant East and darkest north side. Most importantly its focal point, the Volume of the Sacred Law for prayer and obligation. By the same token the initiation is our advent from the darkness of pre-natal gloom into the light of moral truth and spiritual faith. It can be described as coming out of a lonely isolation into a network of friendship and relationships.

Such is the system of moral philosophy set forth in symbols to which the Initiate is introduced. It is in this context that each incident and each emblem can be interpreted. It is in fact a never-ending source of pleasure and satisfaction to the development of the mind of an enthusiastic member of the Craft who seeks further Masonic Education. Thus, at a time when it is most needed, Freemasonry gives to a young man a noble, wise, and time-tried system of thought and a study of moral principles by which to read and interpret the meaning of the world around him and discover his important duties within it. No man can hope to see all this at once, in fact it is open to question whether any man lives long enough to think it all through; for like all simple things in life it is deep and wonderful.

It is therefore in the light of these meanings of Freemasonry that we must try to interpret the *Rite of Destitution* an expression that is seldom heard or even thought worthy of consideration once a Brother has made progress in the Craft. At a certain point in the Ceremony of Initiation every Brother is asked for a token of a certain kind, as a donation in the cause of Charity. If he has been duly and properly prepared, he finds himself unable to grant the request. It is then, in one swift and searching moment, he realises perhaps for the first time in his life what it feels like to actually be destitute. For one instant, in which many emotions mingle, he is made to feel the bewilderment, if not the embarrassment, which surrounds one who is deprived of the necessities of life; upon which, far more than we would like to admit, both the moral and social order of society depends. Then, as if taken by surprise, and as suddenly as before, and again in a manner never to be forgotten, the lesson of one of the most important Golden Rules of the Craft is taught; the Duty of Man to his fellow in time of need!

This profound truth is not left to the imagination, since the initiate is actually put into the place of the man who asks and seeks his aid. This makes such a vivid impact as to remind him for ever of his duties in this regard. In fact, we as Freemasons are under the obligation to assist all humanity, the most primary of which is to succour one's fellow man in desperate plight.

Long ago the Prophet Mohammed said that the end of the world had come when man will not help man. Having said this, we are of course under special obligations to our Brethren in the Craft, as much by the prompting of our own hearts and of course by the vows we have taken. Such principles, far from being narrow and selfish, have the endorsement of Saint Paul the Apostle in his exhortations to the early Christian community. In the Epistle to the Ephesians we read:

'As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men; especially unto them who are of the household of faith'.

It is only another way of saying that 'Charity begins at home' and for Freemasons 'home' is his Lodge and all its members. Henceforth at every subsequent meeting throughout his Masonic career either at home or away, a Brother is invited to make a claim upon his charity that his circumstances in life may fairly warrant.

It starts with the Lodge Charity Box; support for the Province to meet the Festival Charity Appeal Target; support the appeal for this or that worthy cause; all money! Indeed, we have for so long linked charity with the giving of money that the word has to all extent and purposes lost its real meaning. Saint Paul in his sublime praise of charity, in 1 Corinthians 13:3, does not mention money at all; except to say: *'and although I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and I have not charity, it profiteth me nothing'.*

In Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language published in 1754 at the time that our Ritual was settled in its present form the word charity is described as follows: *'Charity: tenderness, love, good-will, alms'.* Compare this with the modern Chambers Concise Dictionary: *'Charity: Non-profit making foundation, institution or cause'.*



Money has its place and value, but it is not everything, much less the sum of our duty as Freemasons in a modern society. There are in fact many things that money cannot do. In fact the law and the prophets contain no better rule for the health of the soul than the following adjuration:

*'Hope thou a little,
Fear not at all.
And Love as much as you can'.*

Surely this was a good and wise wish, if we really think about it.

The things that money cannot cure, are the ills of the spirit, the sickness of the heart, and the dreary dull pain of waiting for those who will return no more. There are hungers which money cannot satisfy, and blinding bereavements from which it offers no shelter. There are times when a hand laid upon the shoulder 'in a friendly sort of way' is worth more than all the money on earth. Take the situation when many a young man fails, or makes a bad mistake for lack of a Brotherly hand which might have held him up, or guided him into a wiser way. These situations are at the core of what The Rite of Destitution is all about; not the sound of pound coins rattling in the bottom of the Charity Box once a month!

The Rite of Destitution! Yes indeed. But a man may have all the money that he needs, and yet be destitute of faith, of hope, of courage. It is therefore our duty as Masons to share our faith and courage with him. To fulfil the obligations of this Rite we must give, not simply money, but something of ourselves.



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Papers offer a simple, direct means of advancement in a particular aspect of Masonic knowledge. They can be used in a variety of ways:

- Read at home for private study
- Shared for pre-reading by members of a discussion group
- Read aloud in Lodge or Chapter, or in an LOI/COI/new members forum
 - Followed by 'any questions'
 - As a precursor to a discussion (in which case much more time is needed, possibly more than double that allocated to the paper itself)
 - Supported by audio-visual aids, if necessary

They can be delivered by a single person or split into bite-sized pieces and read by multiple presenters (in which case, the speaker(s) should have read and practiced the delivery of the paper beforehand).

*Note: All biblical passages are taken from the Authorized King James version unless otherwise specified.

If the paper is to be used to introduce a discussion, the presenter will need to have thought about the material, done a little research, and prepared some open questions to engage with the audience. Kipling's dictum can be of help in preparing open questions, which should begin with one of his 'serving men', as follows: *'I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew). Their names are, What and Why and When and How and Where and Who'*. Rudyard Kipling

If used as part of an event, the paper should be advertised and promoted by way of trailers, flyers and announcements, in summonses, letters, emails, notice boards, and on social media.

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