



Paper

Ecclesiastes Explained

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An explanation of the meaning behind the passage from Ecclesiastes used in the Third-Degree.

Summary

An explanation of the meaning behind the passage from Ecclesiastes which used in the Third-Degree, in some rituals.

Keywords

Third-Degree, Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes Explained

Ecclesiastes Chapter 12 for Lodges open in the Third-Degree who use this scriptural passage in their ceremonies, even though it is not printed in Emulation Ritual.

Brethren, we have recently heard a passage taken from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is a most solemn piece of writing and it fits in very well with the overall content of our Third-Degree Ceremony which teaches us that though death must come to us all, it is not so terrible as failing to live life while we have it in a faithful, honourable and truthful way. However, it cannot be denied that the words we have heard are not easily understood, especially as we hear them in archaic forms; early 17th century English, translated from Latin, itself translated from ancient Hebrew.

‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth’.

The first point to note is the word ‘Remember’ which in this context does not bear its every day meaning of ‘recollect’ some past event or person, but rather means ‘have actively in mind’. In a Masonic context an explanation of the principal parts of the passage can then be given. This harks back to the youthful Entered Apprentice, to whom all things appeared possible, though as we grow older we cannot enjoy life with the same lightness of heart.

‘While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain’. We move on into manhood as Fellow-Crafts, but as we undergo the ritual of the Third-Degree to become Master Masons we have to come to terms with our own mortality, and that is a mark of wisdom and maturity and of our acceptance of our place in the order of created things. Thus, as we grow older our eyes begin to dim and rest and recuperation take longer to achieve.

‘And the strongmen shall bow themselves and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened’.

This refers to bodily degeneration, to having to stoop as we walk, to losing our teeth and suffering from failing eyesight. It is also a reference to our arms losing their strength and becoming tremulous, often experienced as sharp pains or ‘twinges’ from arthritis or rheumatism.

‘And the doors shall be shut in the streets, and he shall rise up at the song of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low’.

This refers to failing hearing and an inability to sleep so that we wake early and cannot then get back to repose, while our voices become gruffer and less musical.

‘When they shall be afraid of that which is high and fears shall be in the way. And the Almond tree shall flourish and the grasshopper be a burden and desire shall fail’.

This refers to increasing inability to cope either physically or mentally with a rapidly changing world. Our hair begins to turn white (as the blossom of the Almond Tree) and we find it harder to deal with afflictions which come our way just as an elderly farmer would have found it difficult to deal with a plague of locusts, while we also find we enjoy the various pleasures of this life less, as time goes by.

‘Or ever the silver chord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain or the wheel broken at the cistern’.

This is taken to refer to increasing physical disability such as curvature or deformity of the limbs and the senile decay of the brain prior to the failure of the heart to sustain life. It may also be that this is an allusion to ‘Egyptian thinking’ from around the time the passage was written, which considered that a silver-cord joined body and soul, and when a person died the cord was pictured as leaving the body and being stretched out until it broke thus releasing the soul from its earthly home.

‘Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return to God who gave it’.

This points out to us that our bodies are made from the same elemental materials as the whole of the rest of the Universe, but we also have a portion of the spirit or ‘breath’ of the Divine Creator which returns to the one who gave it.

While the passage may sound depressing and describes physical frailty, it also points out to us our journey through life and leads us to ponder the choices we must make on that journey. It also reminds us that our end is as our beginning, given that we received the ‘breath of life from our Divine Creator’ and we give the gift back to that source of all being. Thus, our spirit returns to its source and that is a treasure which cannot be taken away, no matter what else assails us.

The passage also looks forward to the Charge after the candidate has been raised, when he is told that the *‘Light of a Master Mason is darkness visible’*, a veil which cannot be penetrated by human experience and intelligence acting by itself unless it is *‘assisted by that light which is from above’*. In this context we must remember that what appears to us to be darkness, is not so to the Divine Creator; as evidenced by another passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, *‘The Darkness is no darkness with Thee, but the night is as clear as the day. The Darkness and the Light to thee are both alike’*. The Divine Creator holds all things and all times in being. What we cannot see in this transitory life is always visible to the Creator of everything.

So, we may say that what the passage means to us is this.

Set the Divine Creator always before your eyes from your earliest days onwards. Think of the One who made you and what you were made for. It was not just for pleasing yourself nor for simply gratifying physical desires. You were made to use your powers and energy in accordance with the Laws of the Divine Creator and are responsible to that Creator for the use of the faculties and capacities which have been given to you. In this sense it is never too late to *‘remember now thy Creator’* while life lasts.

##END##

Recommended use of Papers

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*).

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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