

The allusions in the 12th chapter of Ecclesiastes

In the Scriptures voiced by the Chaplain during the circumambulation in the Master Mason's degree, one interpretation makes this dramatic passage a description of old age and senility; the other, a reference to the seldom experienced and much feared thunderstorm in ancient Palestine.

I'll not now repeat the entire passage, but I'm sure you will at least recall how the verses begin... 'Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; while the sun, or the light, or the moon or the stars be not darkened' ...yes, yes, you know the words, so let's take a closer look at to what they allude.

*Verses 1, 2: The darkening of light and luminaries refers to coming blindness or extreme nearsightedness; and the clouds which return after the rain to a continuation of poor sight after much weeping.

* Verse 3: The 'keepers of the house' are the hands, which may tremble with palsy in old age. The 'strong men' are the legs, which become bowed with the years. The 'grinders', which cease when they are few, refer to the teeth, and 'those that look out of the windows' are, poetically, the eyes.

* Verse 4: The 'doors' are the ears, which grow deaf with age and can no longer hear the sound of grinding of grain in the little stone mills, which the women used. To 'rise up at the voice of a bird' may signify either the light sleep of age easily interrupted by any slight sound, or the nervousness, which is so extreme in some older men that they be startled at any little noise. The 'daughters of music' are the vocal chords which lose their timbre; hence the cracked voice of advanced age.

* Verse 5: The old man fears any height, knowing his brittle bones will stand no fall. He is timid, as he has no strength with which to defend himself. The 'almond tree' blossoms white, like an old man's hair. Any little weight, even a grasshopper, may be too much burden for extreme age to carry. The old have little desire, and the 'long home' is the grave, in anticipation of which the mourners go about the streets.

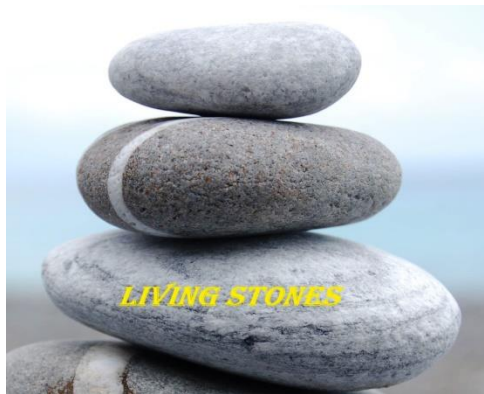
* Verse 6: The 'silver cord' is the spinal cord, the 'golden bowl' is the brain, the 'pitcher broken at the fountain' means a failing heart, and the 'wheel broken at the cistern' refers to the kidneys, bladder and prostate gland, all of which sometimes give trouble to old men.

Let's look closer at the thunderstorm interpretation I mentioned at the beginning...it's certainly in keeping with the magnificent poetry of the words. Think of a windy day, the clouds and rain; towards evening it begins to clear, but the heavens turn black again as the "clouds return after the rain." This was a signal for caution, if not for terror, in Palestine. Men, women and children feared the thunderstorm, probably because they came so seldom. Doors were shut in the streets. The strong guards who stood before the houses of the wealthy were afraid, and trembled, for they could not leave their places.

The little mills with which the women of Palestine ground grain at eventide suddenly stopped; few would remain at their tasks in the face of the coming storm. Women in upper rooms drew back into the darkness. Those outdoors became nervous; no one sang; the black thunderheads flourished their white tops like the almond tree; everyone feared the lightning and the thunder on high; even a little extra weight that kept a man from running quickly to shelter was a burden.

Here the admonition is to remember the Creator before the terror of death, which is worse than the terror of the storm. The rich man with his golden water bowl hung from a silver chain must fear it. The poor man with his earthen pitcher who must send his women to the well for water was in terror. Even the man who was strong and as tough as the crude wooden wheel, which drew the skin bucket to the top of the well, shook with fear. Death is the same for all, and it is feared alike by all.

Whichever interpretation of these symbols you may prefer, it seems clear that the main lesson to be drawn is that now is the time to remember our Creator rather than at some indefinite time in the future, a time which for us....may never come.



Living Stones - Masonic Thoughts for Today's Mason
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