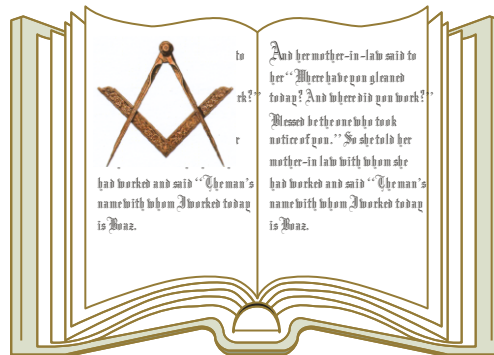


# A Lecture on the Three Great Emblematical Lights of Freemasonry.

By Wor Bro Donald Fenwick



**From Darkness to Light**



Light is an important word in the Masonic system. It conveys a far greater meaning than it is believed to possess by most readers. It is in fact the first of all symbols presented to the candidate at his initiation and continues to be presented to him in various forms throughout his future progress in his Masonic career. It does not simply mean, as might be supposed, *truth and wisdom*, but contains within itself a far more profound reference to the very spirit of speculative Masonry, and embraces within its vast meaning all the other symbols of the order.

Freemasons have been called “The Sons of Light” because they are, or at least entitled to be, in possession of the true meaning of the symbol; while the uninitiated who have not received this knowledge are, said to be, in a state of darkness.

The connection of material light with this emblematical and mental illumination has been a prominent part of all the ancient systems of religion and obscure mysteries.

For the ancient Egyptians the hare was the hieroglyphic for the eyes that are open, because that animal was supposed to always have their eyes open. The Priests adopted the hare as the symbol of moral illumination and it was also the symbol of Osiris, their principal divinity, and the chief object of their mystic rites.

In the Hebrew language the word for hare is *arnebet* which is the combination of *aur* meaning “light” and *nabat* meaning “to see”.

With the Oriental systems of philosophy light was the representation of the highest human good.

In the Bible the light from God makes man’s way clear before him and is subsequently used to signify moral truth. Darkness on the other hand is depicted as something to fear.

In our ritual we also refer to the two great pillars which stood at the porch or entrance to King Solomon's Temple one which represented the pillar of fire which gave light to the Israelites during their escape from their Egyptian bondage and the other the pillar of cloud which proved darkness to Pharaoh and his followers when they attempted to over-take them.

Our learned Brother Pythagoras also maintained the doctrine of two opposing principles. He called the one, unity or *light*, also known by the right hand, equality, stability, and a straight line; the other he named binary or *darkness*, also known by the left hand, inequality, instability, and a curved line. Of the colours he attributed white to the good principle and black to the evil one.

Let us now look at how all this is woven into the Masonic system which we follow today.

In the first degree the Candidate enters blindfolded to signify darkness or being in a state of ignorance with regard to the secrets and mysteries of Ancient Freemasonry. After the obligation the material blessing of light is restored. Many people regard this as the most important part of the initiation ceremony. He is asked a question: *“Having been kept for a considerable time in a state of darkness what, in your present situation, is the predominant wish of your heart?”* and the Candidate answers *“Light.”* This indicates his longing for the light of knowledge of truth relating to himself.

*“Having been kept for a considerable time in a state of darkness.”* Refers to the candidate’s life so far and to quote W.Bro. Julian Rees in his book The Stairway of Freemasonry *“in [the Candidate’s] journey so far, where his own selfish impulses may have guided him and he may not be free to set those aside and serve his fellow-men selflessly, then he may well agree that he has been in a state of darkness for much of his life up to now.”*

End of quote.

His search for light began when he first considered joining the Fraternity, unbiased by improper solicitation of friends against his own inclinations and not influenced by mercenary or other unworthy motives.

Let us examine the manner in which the light is revealed. It has been known as “the Shock of Enlightenment”.

To quote Dr Mackey : “A striking of hands and feet so as to produce a sudden noise is called “The shock” This was used at the beginning of the last century when the Candidate first entered the Lodge room and was called the “Shock of Entrance”

We now use this method in the first Degree to symbolise the birth of material light. He goes onto say ***The Shock of Enlightenment is, then, a symbol of the change which is now taking place in the intellectual condition of the candidate. It is the symbol of intellectual light and the dispersion of intellectual darkness.***” End of Quote.

The Candidate is then directed towards the three great emblematical lights in Freemasonry; the Volume of the Sacred Law, the square and the compasses.

They are called the three great *emblematical* lights and I wondered why they used the word emblematical and not symbolical.

I found that an emblem is a material object which represents something which is known but cannot be actually seen. Thus a square, which is the *implement* we call a square; in Freemasonry is an emblem of *morality*, a plumb rule an emblem of *rectitude of conduct* and the level an emblem of the *equality of mankind*.

The word *emblem* and the word *symbol* are synonymous however the two words do not express exactly the same meaning. An emblem is a representation of an *idea* by a visible object as we have just stated but a symbol is more extensive in its use.

To demonstrate this we can turn to our most used and best known symbols and that is the alphabet. Each letter in the alphabet is a symbol of a certain sound or sounds. When we are first taught the alphabet we were given objects to relate the symbol to the sound as in A is for apple and then the sound, however A is not the symbol for the material object but the sound and is also not a symbol of an idea but a sound.

So now let us return to our emblematical lights in Freemasonry.

There are three great lights and there are three lesser lights. In the 1800's the Lodge room had or was supposed to have three windows situated in the East, the West and in the South. These were called the **fixed lights** and were meant to light the men **to**, **at** and **from** their work. The three **lesser lights** we have in the Lodge room now are not substitutes for the three fixed lights; as records show that both were used at the same time in those days.



The absence of a light in the north many may be aware of was because Freemasonry started in the northern hemisphere where the sun rose in the east travelled across the southern sky and set in the west so there was never any natural light coming into a building from the north.

However there is another explanation even more complex than that. In simple terms the Earth's path around the Sun is not circular but elliptical. The axis of the earth is inclined at 23 and a half degrees towards the sun. Halfway during its yearly path around the sun is inclined by the same angle away from the sun. The longest day in the northern hemisphere is June 21<sup>st</sup> and this occurs when the North Pole is most inclined towards the sun. Any building situated between latitudes 23 and a half north and 23 and a half south of the equator will receive the rays of the sun at meridian (noon) from the north at some time during the year. King Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem being in latitude 31 degrees 47 seconds north lay beyond this limit. At no time in the year, therefore, did the sun at meridian "dart its rays into the northerly portion thereof." \*Introduction to Freemasonry by Carl H. Claudy

As I have said light is a very important word in the Masonic vocabulary. It does not simply mean truth or wisdom but has a more profound symbolism of all knowledge. So when it is said that we pass from darkness into light we go from ignorance to knowledge, knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. Knowledge not only of the creator and designer of all life but also the truths of why we are here and what we are here for.

Light in most cultures is the symbol of knowledge or enlightenment.

*The truth that Freemasonry teaches is the most interesting of human studies – the knowledge of oneself. There is an inner light, a divinity, in each of us, which is the genuine secret of a Master Mason and which, in our present state of darkness or ignorance, is lost to us. Freemasonry teaches us that the sole purpose of existence is to seek for that which is lost. That we must persevere in our search for this light and labour incessantly to make ourselves perfect. Our rituals and ceremonies are specifically designed to guide us in this spiritual journey – to dispel ignorance, to know God and finally to experience God the GAOTU.\**

\*Masonic Symbolism by W.Bro. Madhaven

Now we look at the three great emblematical lights individually, the first great light is the Volume of the Sacred Law which is to govern our faith.

The Sacred Volume is the greatest of the three Great Lights. It represents the revealed will of God the GAOTU. It has been said to be the greatest since the beginning of Freemasonry, as our ultimate goal in life is to focus on our relationship with God.

It is in fact a book of knowledge, knowledge of ourselves and of the GAOTU. Knowledge of the divine plan for mankind.

So much of our tradition and moral teachings come from the sacred writings. They give us, in depth, the wisdom of King Solomon and they also contain the very foundation of our ritual; that is the building of King Solomon's temple to the glory of God. They also give us the truth. The real object of Freemasonry is the search for truth, that truth is the unity of God and the immortality of the soul. The various degrees in the craft represent the various stages of life which we pass through and shows the many difficulties which we face either individually or collectively as we go from ignorance to the acquisition of truth. This truth is symbolised by the VSL.

When the candidate first enters the Lodge right through to his attainment of the third Degree he is instructed to search for the truth. Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth are the three great tenants of Freemasonry.

Another fact I discovered in my research is why, during our ceremonies, the VSL lies *open* on the altar. The reason for this is that from the very beginning the VSL was considered the great light of Masonry. To close it would cut off the divine light which emanates from it and so when it remains open the Lodge is not in darkness with regard to its illuminating power.

A closed book, a sealed book, would indicate that its contents are secret so the VSL lies open for all to read its divine truths, as it is a rule and guide of our conduct.

The second great emblematical light is the square. It is a simple implement but one of absolute precision. It is exactly 90 degree or the forth part of a circle nothing more and nothing less.

It is said to be one of the most important and significant symbols in Freemasonry. No symbol in Freemasonry has the universal significance of the square. It is the emblem known the world over as the premier implement of the stone worker and the most important of the Masonic working tools.

We may well ask why it is called a “right angle” and I would dare hazard a guess that many of the most experienced Masons would hesitate before answering.

The ninety-degree angle is called a *right* angle because that is the only angle which is “*right*” for stones to be cut to, to form a wall, a building, a cathedral. Any other angle is masonically incorrect. Stonemasons use the square to prove the perfect ashlar. If the stone fits the square then it is ready for the builder’s use. That is why “square” has the meaning of: moral, upright, honourable and fair dealing even to society in general. Everyone knows what you mean when you ask for a square deal or if you were to say that you thought someone wasn’t being square with you.

There are three main ways in Freemasonry that the square is used. The first and most important is its role as one of the three great lights in Freemasonry, the second as a working tool in the Second Degree and the third use is as the Symbol or Jewel of the Master of the Lodge. However, wherever it is used it remains a symbol of morality, of truthfulness and honesty.

As a Masonic symbol it is very ancient and was used by the Operative Masons.

In 1830 an architect was engaged to rebuild a very ancient bridge called Baal Bridge near Limerick in Ireland. During the work he found under the foundation stone an old brass square which was quite eaten away but on its two surfaces were inscribed the following inscription:

I WILL STRIVE TO LIVE WITH LOVE & CARE  
UPON THE LEVEL – BY THE SQUARE

And the date inscribed on the square was 1517.

This discovery proves, if proof is necessary, that the idea and symbolism of the square was borrowed from our Operative brethren of former days.

But how old is the use of the square and indeed its symbolism? In his book entitled Introduction to Freemasonry - The Entered Apprentice, Carl Claudy states that *“Five centuries before the Christian era a Chinese author wrote a book called the Great Learning. In it is the negative of the Golden Rule, that a man should not do unto others that which he does not wish others to do unto him. And then the Chinese Sage adds, This is called the principle of acting on the Square.”*

This really made me think could this be true and I hesitated to include this information until I was sure of its authenticity so I started to research the book the Great Learning. I found many references to it and used a translation by James Legge which I found in the University of Adelaide Library thanks to the internet.

Carl Claudy has paraphrased what Confucius wrote so I thought I would include an actual translation.



***“What a man dislikes in his superiors, let him not display in the treatment of his inferiors; what he dislikes in inferiors, let him not display in the service of his superiors; what he hates in those who are before him, let him not therewith precede those who are behind him; what he hates in those who are behind him, let him not bestow on the left; what he hates to receive on the left, let him not bestow on the right:- this is what is called ‘The principle with which, as with a measuring square, to regulate one’s conduct’.”***

It is amazing to think that in 500 BC the square was an emblem to regulate one’s conduct.

So this ancient square illuminates our mind and teaches us to regulate our lives according to Masonic line and rule, to harmonise our conduct in this life so as to render us acceptable to that Divine being from whom all goodness springs.

Every time we see it no matter where it is we should be reminded of our personal dedication to the moral truth in life.

When we give the sign in any degree our feet are in the form of a square as an emblem of the rectitude of our actions. Here the square is an emblem that gives us knowledge of ourselves and our actions.

The third great emblematical light is the Compasses. They impart to us the knowledge of the limits and bounds which we are to observe in this life.

The compasses for the operative mason were used to ascertain the measurements and proportions which inspire beauty as well as stability for his work.

So in Freemasonry it is an important instrument emblematical of virtue and the true measure of a Mason's life and conduct.

As the VSL gives us light on our duties to God and the square illustrates our duties to our neighbours and brothers so the compasses give us the light which instructs us in the duty we owe to ourselves, to keep our passions and prejudices within due bounds.

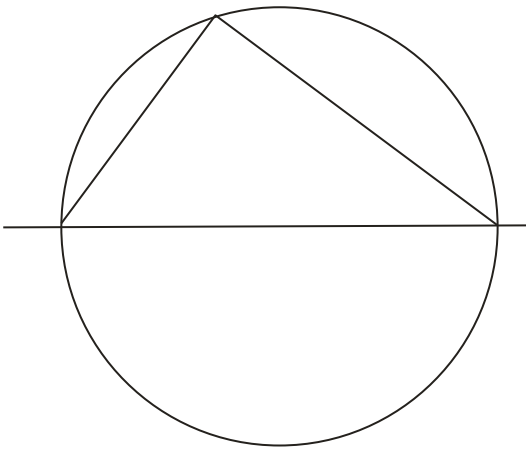
In preparing this lecture I came up with a very perplexing question: which came first the square or the compasses?

It is my belief that the compasses came first because I believe that without the compasses you cannot determine the true form of a square.

When I was at High School I studied Technical Drawing and one of the first lessons was the technique of dividing a circle into four equal portions using a set of compasses. I have never been shown a method of determining an exact angle of 90 degrees in any other way.

However in my research I found another way of determining a perfect right angle but it is still using a circle drawn by a pair of compasses.

Draw a circle – any size – on a piece of paper. With a straight edge draw a line through its centre. Put a dot on the circumference and the join the dot to the two places where the centre line crosses the circumference of the circle. No matter where you put the dot this will make a perfect ninety-degree angle every time.



This was the operative Mason's great secret – knowing how to “try the square” and was their constant method of testing their tools.

It is also worthy of noting that the square and compasses throughout the world have become the universal symbol of Freemasonry recognised by both members and non-members of the fraternity. In the USA a company tried to have the square and compasses registered as a trade mark and it was refused on the grounds that it was so universally recognised as a symbol of the Freemasons that any other use would be deceptive.

Another interesting fact is that wherever it is used in public such as notices or on buildings etc the position of the square and compasses is always in the third degree which symbolises that all is revealed and nothing hidden. We cannot be sure if this has been a conscious decision or not, it does however indicate that the Fraternity is open and not hidden.

As we light the three lesser lights at each meeting or as we display the three great emblematical lights at the opening or when we use the absence of light to dramatic effect in the third degree let us pause for a moment and consider the effect light has on our lives and Masonic careers.

In conclusion; *Freemasonry is too priceless a heritage to be permitted to perish through sheer apathy. It has to be nurtured and preserved. We have all been charged with making daily advancements in Masonic knowledge;[maybe] a duty seldom discharged. We owe it to the institution, and to ourselves, to delve into the meaning of the symbols and the emblems, that the true beauty of Freemasonry may once again be unfolded to us.*

*Throw wide open the shutters of your mind and imagination. Look to find in [Freemasonry] a living philosophy, realise that its secrets, which are many and valuable, are not upon the surface and that its mysteries are eternal ones, of the Spirit.\**

May the GAOTU guide us in all our ways and shed His divine light on our path through life.

\* The Meaning of Masonry by W.L.Wilmhurst

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