

The Burning Heart of a Freemason

The most striking emblem of the Degree is the flaming heart. The flaming heart will appear again on one of the Great Standards of the camp scene in the 32nd Degree. There, it is accompanied by the motto which translates "inflamed with glory, it arises." The 11th Degree associates the flaming heart as symbolic of zeal and devotion. Discuss the possible symbolic meanings and associations of the flaming heart. In what ways does that reflect Masonic ideals?

The primary symbol of the Eleventh Degree, Sublime Elect of the Twelve, is the flaming heart. This symbol really consists of two different symbols: the heart itself, and fire. The heart has traditionally been interpreted as the seat of the emotions or passions, and is often used as a metaphor or symbol of love, which is why so many poems and songs mention the heart. ("Unchain My Heart", "Achy Breaky Heart", "My Heart Will Go On", "Heart of Glass", and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco" to name a few.) When we wish to speak seriously, honestly, and frankly with another person, we have a "heart-to-heart" talk. And how many movies have used the cliché of the brave young man, who is told by an older, wiser character, "You got real heart, kid"? Obviously, the greeting card companies make a killing on the heart motif around the middle of February.

Fire, for its part, is also a symbol of love, but a burning, almost uncontrollable love. (The songs "Ring of Fire", "Light My Fire", and "I'm on Fire" spring to mind.) This makes it also a symbol of zeal and passion for someone--or something, not necessarily another person. One can feel passion or zeal for a cause, an idea, a faith, or a country. But fire as a symbol can also mean change or purification. In mythology, the phoenix burns to ashes and is reborn anew. From the metal-workers' field we get the ideas of being "tempered (or purified) by fire," and undergoing a rigorous event is often referred to as "trial by fire." (This phrase has a much more sinister history which we need not address here.) Indeed, fire is so important that it is one of the four elements of the classical sciences.

So why is the symbol of the flaming heart so prominent in the Eleventh Degree, and what can it mean to Freemasons? Without conducting a poll, I wonder how many people initially react to the symbol as a Catholic one, as I did. That is, if someone were to show me a picture of a flaming heart I would be much more likely to say it is a Catholic symbol, rather than a Masonic one. For Catholics, the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a symbol of the love of Jesus for all of humanity. Often, in addition to flames, the heart of Jesus is shown as being pierced with a cross and with thorns twisted around it. For many Christians this represents the depth of Jesus' love, and that he was prepared to suffer and die for all people. Used in the rituals of the Scottish Rite, however, it has different meanings that can be appreciated by adherents of all faiths.

With this religious aspect in mind, I thought it might be interesting to search the sacred texts for references to the heart. As a way of exploring just a few of the many meanings of this symbol, and how they relate to the teachings of Freemasonry and offer us practical applications for the Mason's life, I will look at five (a good Masonic number) passages taken from the holy books of the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims.

Psalm 24:3-4

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully."

This passage asks two questions and then gives an answer. The questions are interesting from a Masonic perspective because the degrees of Masonry echo the imagery they contain. First, we think of a man's progression through the degrees as a journey upward, out of darkness, toward the light. This idea is represented in an overt way with the winding staircase of the Middle Chamber in the Fellow Craft degree, which is not unlike ascending a hill. Second, in the Third Degree we enter the Sanctum Sanctorum, and "stand in his holy

place." As Masons we have had to prove to our brothers, both in the investigation of our petition and in the preparatory lecture and questions before initiation, that we were approaching Masonry with "clean hands" and that our hearts were pure. Indeed, we are asked, "Where were you first prepared to be made a Mason?" To which we reply, "In my heart." Only with a pure heart can we take our oaths seriously and pass through the porch, ascend the stairs, and enter the Holy of Holies. What in the Psalm is called "swear[ing] deceitfully" we might call "secret evasion."

Psalm 119:11

"I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you."

Again we find in this verse language that takes on new meaning when interpreted Masonically. In the legend of Hiram Abiff the master's word is lost. We, as Masons, are ever in search of it as we strive to build our own personal Masonic edifice--our character. The word, then, is in our own hearts and we hope one day to perfect our Temple and find that which was lost, by using the symbolic tools of Masonry to improve ourselves. Each Master Mason has gone through the ritual of symbolically "losing the word", so we know that our Brothers are searching in their hearts for the same thing that we are searching for in ours. This is the Mystic Tie that binds us, and one of the true treasures of Freemasonry. Because of this tie, we are bound not to cheat, wrong, or defraud our Brothers, but to keep their welfare as close to our hearts as our own.

Luke 24:32

"Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Here we find a specific reference to the symbol in question: a heart on fire. As noted above, one can feel as though one's heart is inflamed with passion for any number of reasons: love, zeal, patriotism, etc. Here, the reason is knowledge. The writer is remembering how the Teacher interpreted the scriptures and shed new light on them, giving meanings and uncovering nuances that the writer had never considered. Those who have ever sat in a class and had their minds blown by a particularly wonderful professor, who opened up whole vistas never before considered, can appreciate the feeling of the writer of Luke. A zeal for knowledge is very important to the true Mason. From the exhortation to study the seven liberal arts and sciences in the Fellow Craft degree, to the revelations of the Scottish Rite degrees, the pursuit of knowledge is forcefully recommended throughout Masonry. It inflames the heart of all true seekers of Masonic light.

2 Peter 1:19

"So we have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

This passage recalls a powerful image from the Ninth Degree, Elu of the Nine: the candle burning in the cave of the assassins. The cave itself was a symbol of the confinement of the human soul and intellect ignorance and superstition. The feeble candle was the "poor, pale light that spiritual despotism substitutes in the soul for that of the day" (Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor and Guide, p. 110). By these symbols Freemasons are taught to struggle against spiritual oppression and tyranny of the intellect. We are taught to question authority--not always for the sake of rebellion, but to keep authority accountable and honest--and to think for ourselves and do what is right. Where we see oppression, of the body or the spirit, we are to act in defense of the oppressed. Whoever has seen injustice being done and not acted, whether out of fear or a feeling that "I shouldn't get involved," knows that the hours wishing for another chance to make a positive difference are dark, indeed. By taking action to dispel the darkness of ignorance and oppression, we feel the "morning star ris[ing] in [our] hearts," burning with the white hot light of day.

Surah 22:46

"Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts."

This verse from the Koran is an invitation to travel for the purpose of gaining wisdom. In some of our rituals we are asked, "Whither are you traveling?" To which we respond, "From the west, and traveling toward the east in search of that which was lost." That is, we are traveling from the place where the sun goes down, toward the place where the sun comes up--a place of light, or knowledge. We are moving from blindness to sight, as implied in this verse. Combine this with the passage in Luke and we find that the blind heart will, as it gains wisdom, begin to burn with a fire for knowledge. This is accomplished by traveling, metaphorically or otherwise. The idea of traveling is dear to all true Masons, whether the travels are literal (to another lodge or jurisdiction) or intellectual (the journey through the ritual and the mysteries of Masonic symbolism). The more we travel, and the more we keep our minds and hearts open to new ideas and experiences, the richer we will become.

In the drama of the Eleventh Degree we are told that the Twelve Elus are advanced to the rank and title of Prince Ameth. "Ameth" means "truth, fidelity, firmness and constancy in keeping one's promises" (Bridge to Light, p. 71). That is, a zeal for truth and doing what is right, even if it means self-sacrifice. That zeal is symbolized by the flaming heart. But that symbol contains much more, as I hope I have shown by looking at some of the Volumes of the Sacred Law which appear on our altars. From the Psalms we learn that only if we have a pure heart will our obligations mean anything and we will be allowed to ascend the hill of the Lord. We also learn that what we seek in our own hearts is the same thing our Brothers seek in theirs. This tie binds us together. From the New Testament we learn that love of knowledge which inflames the hearts of all true Masons, and that with knowledge comes the responsibility to struggle against ignorance, tyranny, and fanaticism and help the downtrodden. Finally, the Muslims' holy book demonstrates the importance of travel and experience in gaining wisdom and teaching our hearts to see. Moving toward the light, whether the white hot light of day, from which no evil can hide, or the fire of knowledge (of both the world and ourselves), is the path of every Mason whose heart burns within him.