

# “The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon”

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Ecclesiastes 12: 1-7 & 1 Peter 2: 4-9 NIV

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## ***Ecclesiastes 12: 1-7 NIV***

*Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, “I find no pleasure in them”—before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark, and the clouds return after the rain; when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men stoop, when the grinders cease because they are few, and those looking through the windows grow dim; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred.*

*Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,*

*and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*

## ***1 Peter 2: 4-9 NIV***

*As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture, it says: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”*

*Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,” and, “A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for.*

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

This morning we welcome to Wall Street the Knights Templar of our area. Fasten your seatbelts as we all travel together, back in time, to Jerusalem.

Today’s Knights Templars have no historic connection to the ancient Knights Templars of the Middle Ages. Today’s Knights Templars are a Masonic Order. You have to be a Mason to join, and not just any Mason — you need to reach a high degree of Masonry before you can become a Templar. The Knights Templars are at the pinnacle among the highest orders of Masonry.

The medieval Knights Templars were disbanded in brutal fashion in 1312. It wasn’t until the late 1700’s that the Masons revived the order. Now, while the Knights Templar have no historic connection with the medieval order, the Masons, on the other hand, do have a connection to their medieval brethren. You can trace the history of the Masons back to the medieval era when they were building the great cathedrals all over Europe. So the masons were around at the same time as the medieval Knights

Templars, but there is no historic evidence that these two groups were in any way connected to each other in the Middle Ages.

So, the question I am curious about is this: Why did the Masons take it upon themselves to revive the order of the Knights Templars? And why did they place that order at the apex of their organization — at the pinnacle of masonry?

There are a lot of conspiracy theories and ancient stories and lore that surround both the Masons and the Knights Templar. These have been mythologized over the years, and authors like Dan Brown have used them for the basis of popular novels and movies.

I am not a Knights Templar, so I am not in possession of the secrets that they hold. However, I am a Mason. In fact, I am the Master of Central Lodge no. 110 in Prescott where my great-grandfather Rev. Edward Coates was a Mason along with two of his brothers. So, I know something about Masonry, and I love history, so this sermon is an exploration of this very question: Why did the Masons revive the order of Knights Templar? And why did they place it at the apex of Masonry?

Let's start with a quick history of the Medieval Knights Templars.

The original order of Knights Templar was founded in Jerusalem right after the first Crusade in 1119. A small group of knights saw a need. Now that the Holy Land was Christian, pilgrims were starting to make their way from Europe to Jerusalem but were getting robbed and sometimes killed along the way. Remember that in the Middle Ages there were no police forces, and traveling anywhere in Europe, and especially to the Middle East, was dangerous.

So, these Knights dedicated their lives and their skills as soldiers to protecting pilgrims on the road to Jerusalem. They were sanctioned by the Pope, and they took vows of poverty and celibacy, similar to monks. And they led a monastic lifestyle, living poor, doing all the daily and evening prayers that monks do, *but they were also soldiers, riding out of Jerusalem to protect pilgrims.* The very first contingent of Knights Templars were housed in the ruins of the ancient temple of Solomon, and they called themselves "The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon." Because of this, they became known as the Knights Templar.

The order lasted for roughly 200 years. By the year 1300 they were a vast order, spread out all over Europe, with a huge amount of wealth, which they would lend to various Kings in the Roman Empire. One of the Kings that borrowed a lot of money from the Knights Templars was King Philip IV of France. On Friday, October the 13th, in 1307, he ordered the arrest of thousands of Knights Templars, including the Grand Master, from all over France. They held a sham trial, accused them of being homosexuals, and burned them at the stake. Not long afterwards the order was officially disbanded by Pope Clement, who ordered all Kings of Europe to arrest

them, and seize their property. That's the quick history of the medieval Knights Templar.

Now let's take a look at the history of the Masons:

The history of the Masons is less known. Unlike the Knights Templar, the original masons did not write down their story, and they were not as prominent or as high profile as the Knights Templars.

In the Middle Ages Europe was building great cathedrals, most of which stand to this day, all built by Masons. They were called Masons, but in today's world we would call them architects and engineers.

The Masons had two guiding principles:

- 1) If you are going to build the house of God, you yourself needed to be a just and upright man of God.
- 2) If you were going to build the house of God, you needed to know some science. You needed to know and understand the principles of physics, math, load bearing walls and pillars... etc.

But there was a problem with this: the Catholic Church, in some parts of Europe, did not always take kindly to the teachings of science. The Church in the Middle Ages viewed the study of science as a threat to Christianity. But the Masons didn't see it that way. They saw no contradiction whatsoever between Christianity and science. In fact, for them the study of science strengthened their faith.

But the reality of the times was that anyone caught studying and disseminating principles of science could be subjected to trials of pagan witchcraft, and in some cases burned at the stake. This forced the Masons to be secretive. Instead of writing down their teachings, they used symbols. These symbols represented the principles of building large structures *and* building up yourself as a man of God. And because Masons traveled all over Europe from construction site to construction site, they developed secret handshakes to identify themselves.

At some point, we don't know exactly when, likely after most of the cathedrals in Europe were built, the Masons started admitting non-builders into their lodges, and turned their focus towards building better men. A motto of Masonry that is still around to this day is: "Making good men better: better men of God, better husbands, better fathers, better sons, better employers, better members of their communities."

So, let's now return to the big question: Why did the Masons revive the Order of the Knights Templar? And why did they place that order at the pinnacle of Masonry?

Let's take a look at what these two groups have in common:

- They both date back to the Middle Ages
- They both have the service of God at the core of their orders:

- The Masons knew how to build large structures and dedicated their skillset to the glory of God.
- The Templars were soldiers, they knew how to fight, protect, and establish security, and dedicated their skills to the glory God.
- Both groups have been persecuted over the centuries and were driven into secrecy.
- Both groups use symbols to communicate their knowledge and teachings.

Let's dive a little deeper into the symbols.

- Here's an example of a Masonic symbol: The square and compass is the most well-known Masonic symbol. Both are important tools in architecture. Anyone who has ever done any carpentry or building of any kind knows the importance of a square – to know true 90-degree angles. For the Masons the Square symbolizes the Law of God – a perfect square symbolizing a perfect law. The Compass, a tool used by architects to design buildings, symbolizes that we are the architects of our own lives, but we must stay within the law of God.

There is another symbol of Masonry that isn't advertised much. In fact, Masonic lodges are instructed to remove this symbol from lodge rooms when the buildings are open to the public. Why? Because this symbol is a bit creepy and can feed into conspiracy theories. The symbol is the skull and cross bones. Now, the Masons are not the only group in history to have used this symbol. It's been used by pirates and it's the symbol of poison commonly found on cleaning products. It is a symbol of fear and death.

So why would the Masons make use of such a symbol? The reason is this: Masons teach their members to conquer their fear of death, because *it's only when you conquer the fear of death that you can truly live.*

Anyone who has had a near death experience, or who survived cancer, looks at life very differently! They are changed people. They love more deeply, they are quicker to forgive and to ask for forgiveness. And their priorities in life are often realigned.

Ecclesiastes 12 says:

Honour and enjoy your Creator while you're still young,  
 Before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes,  
 Before your vision dims and the world blurs,  
 And the winter years keep you close to the fire.

The lesson from this piece of scripture is this: don't wait until you are old and close to death to contemplate your own mortality and your relationship with God — do it now while you are still young! Because if you do, you will lead a much richer and healthier life.

A number of years ago I was doing some work at my parents' house, and I could overhear a conversation my dad Rev. Alan Bennett was having with Harold Sheridan. Harold was a lifelong member of this congregation and was a Mason and a Knights Templar, and my dad was his minister for years. Harold had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. Now I normally don't make a habit of listening in on conversations, especially deep and private conversations between someone who is dying and their minister. So, I was trying not to listen in, but my dad had Harold on speaker phone, and because my dad's hearing wasn't so good, he had the volume up really loud. But then I heard my name mentioned, and so I caught a small part of the conversation.

Harold explained that he had only weeks to live and my dad asked him how he was coping with that information. I'll never forget Harold's answer. He said, "Al, I'm not afraid of dying. The Masons taught me that. Josh would understand, he's a Mason!" Harold had no fear of death and had lived a great life.

When you reflect on your own mortality, your own death, it changes you, and it makes you a better person.

Now let's talk about a similar symbol used by the Knights Templar. The Knights Templar have a symbol of an ancient device used for torture and killing. It's a symbol that is over 2000 years old, and in ancient times when people saw this symbol, it would fill them with fear and dread. Anyone know what symbol I'm talking about? I'll give you a hint – that very symbol is also here in this church. It's the symbol of the cross.

As Christians we forget that the cross was a symbol of fear and death. Historians say that crucifixion was the worst form of capital punishment ever invented by humans. Crucifixion was designed to torture, humiliate, and ultimately kill. It was a very public execution used by the Roman Empire to instill fear into the population.

But Christ defeated death. Christ was crucified by the Romans and rose from the dead three days later. In so doing Christ transformed this symbol from a symbol of despair into a symbol of hope, from a symbol of fear into a symbol of love, and from a symbol of death into a symbol of everlasting life

The scripture today from 1 Peter talks about building a spiritual house, and says, "the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." In ancient times all building construction depended heavily on the cornerstone. The cornerstone was the first stone to be placed, and the

rest of the building was constructed to be in line with the cornerstone. Christ is the living stone that builders rejected but has become the cornerstone. When we are constructing our own lives, if we place Christ as the cornerstone, our lives will be straight and true.

This, I believe, is where the Masons and the Knights Templar come together. Both believe that a life with God is a meaningful life — one that doesn't fear death, one that spreads truth, love and joy and builds relationships around them. And the Masons have placed the Knights Templar at the apex of their ancient organization because they knew that following Christ and placing Christ as the cornerstone of our lives is the key to life's mysteries. When Christ is the cornerstone of the spiritual building that is you, you will live a life worth living, one with meaning and truth.

If you dedicate your life to Christ, he will transform you; and fill you with hope and love. He will fill you with kindness and goodness. And he will build within you a superstructure that will stand tall.

Thanks be to God, Amen