

## So Mote It Be

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How familiar the phrase is. No Lodge is ever opened or closed, in due form, without using it. Yet how few know how old it is, much less what a deep meaning it has in it. Like so many old and lovely things, it is so near to us that we do not see it.

As far back as we can go in the annals of the Craft we find this old phrase. Its form betrays its age. The word mote is an Anglo-Saxon word, derived from an anomalous verb, motan. Chaucer uses the exact phrase in the same sense in which we use it, meaning "So may it be." It is found in the Regius Poem, the oldest document of the Craft, just as we use it today.

As every one knows, it is the Masonic form of the ancient Amen which echoes through the ages, gathering meaning and music as it goes until it is one of the richest and most haunting of words. At first only a sign of assent, on the part either of an individual or of an assembly, to words of prayer or praise, it has come to stand as a sentinel at the gateway of silence.

When we have uttered all that we can utter, and our poor words seem like ripples on the bosom of the unspoken, somehow this familiar phrase gathers up all that is left – our dumb yearnings, our deepest longings – and bears them aloft to One who understands. In some strange way it seems to speak for us into the very ear of God the things for which words were never made.

So, naturally, it has a place of honour among us. At the marriage altar it speaks its blessing as young love walks toward the bliss or sorrow of hidden years. It stands beside the cradle when we dedicate our little ones to the holy life, mingling its benediction with our vows. At the grave side it utters its sad response to the shadowy Amen which death pronounces over our friends.

When, in our turn, we see the end of the road, and would make a last will and testament, leaving our earnings and savings to those whom we love, the old legal phrase asks us to repeat after it: "In the name of God, Amen." And with us, as with Gerontius in his Dream, the last word we hear when the voices of earth grow faint and the silence of God covers us, is the old Amen, So Mote it be.

How impressively it echoes through the Book of Holy Law. We hear it in the Psalms, as chorus answers to chorus, where it is sometimes reduplicated for emphasis. In the talks of Jesus with His friends it has a striking use, hidden in the English version. The oft-repeated phrase, "Verily, verily I say unto you," if rightly translated means, "Amen, amen, I say unto you." Later, in the Epistles of Paul, the word Amen becomes the name of Christ, who is the Amen of God to the faith of man.

So, too, in the Lodge, at opening, at closing, and in the hour of initiation. No Mason ever enters upon any great or important undertaking without invoking the aid and blessing of Deity. And he ends his prayer with the old phrase, "So mote it be." Which is another way of saying: The will of God be done. Or, whatever be the answer of God to his prayer: So be it – because it is wise and right.

What, then, is the meaning of this old phrase, so interwoven with all our Masonic lore, simple, tender, haunting? It has two meanings for us everywhere, in the Church or in the Lodge. First, it is the assent of

man to the way and will of God; assent to His commands; assent to His providence, even when a tender, terrible stroke of death takes from us one much loved and leaves us forlorn.

Still, somehow, we must say: So it is; so be it. He is a wise man, a brave man, who, baffled by the woes of life, when disaster follows fast and follows faster, can nevertheless accept his lot as a part of the will of God and say, though it may almost choke him to say it; So mote it be. It is not blind submission, nor dumb resignation, but a wise reconciliation to the will of the Eternal.

The other meaning of the phrase is even more wonderful: it is the assent of God to the aspiration of man. Man can bear much – anything, perhaps – if he feels that God knows, cares and feels for him and with him. If God says Amen, So it is, to our faith and hope and love, it links our perplexed meanings, and helps us to see, however dimly, or in a glass darkly, that there is a wise and good purpose in life, despite its sorrow and suffering, and that we are not at the mercy of Fate or the whim of Chance.

Does God speak to man, confirming his faith and hope? If so, how? Indeed, yes! God is not the great *I Was*, but the great *I Am*, and He is neither deaf nor dumb. In Him we live and move and have our being – He speaks to us in nature, in the moral law, and in our own hearts, if we have ears to hear. But He speaks most clearly in the Book of Holy Law which lies open upon our Altar.

Nor is that all. Some of us hold that the Word of God “became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,” in a life the loveliest ever lived among men, showing us what life is, what it means, and to what fine issues it ascends when we do the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven. No one of us but grows wistful when he thinks of the life of Jesus, however far we fall below it.

Today men are asking the question: Does it do any good to pray? The man who actually prays does not ask such a question. As well ask if it does a bird any good to sing, or a flower to bloom? Prayer is natural, instinctive, in man. We are made so. Man is made for prayer, as sparks ascending seek the sun. He would not need religious faith if the objects of it did not exist.

Are prayers ever answered? Yes, always, as Emerson taught us long ago. Who rises from prayer a better man, his prayer is answered – and that is as far as we need to go. The deepest desire, the ruling motive of a man, is his actual prayer, and it shapes his life after its form and color. In this sense all prayer is answered, and that is why we ought to be careful what we pray for – because in the end we always get it.

What, then, is the good of prayer? It makes us repose on the unknown with hope; it makes us ready for life. It is a recognition of laws and the thread of our conjunction with them. It is not the purpose of prayer to beg or make God do what we want done. Its purpose is to bring us to do the will of God, which is greater and wiser than our will. It is not to use God, but to be used by Him in the service of His plan.

Can man, by prayer, change the will of God? No, and Yes. True prayer does not wish or seek to change the larger will of God, which involves in its sweep and scope the duty and destiny of humanity. But it can and does change the will of God concerning us, because it changes our will and attitude toward Him, which is the vital thing in prayer for us.

For example, if a man is living a wicked life, we know what the will of God will be for Him. All evil ways have been often tried, and we know what the end is, just as we know the answer to a problem in

geometry. But if a man who is living wickedly changes his way of living, and his inner attitude, he changes the will of God – if not His will, at least His intention. That is, he attains what even the Divine will could not give him and do for him unless it had been affected by his will and prayer.

The place of prayer in Masonry is not perfunctory. It is not a mere matter of form and rote. It is vital and profound. As a man enters the Lodge, as an initiate, prayer is offered for him to God in whom he puts his trust. Later, in a crisis of his initiation, he must pray for himself, orally or mentally as his heart may elect. It is not just a ceremony; it is basic in the faith and spirit of Masonry.

Still later, in a scene which no Mason ever forgets, when the shadow is darkest, and the most precious thing a Mason can desire or seek seems lost, in the perplexity and despair of the Lodge, a prayer is offered. As recorded in our Monitors, it is a Mosaic of Bible words, in which the grim facts of life and death are set forth in stark reality, and appeal is made to the pity and light of God.

It is a truly great prayer, to join in which is to place ourselves in the very hands of God, as all must do in the end, trust His will and way, following where no path is into the soft and fascinating darkness which men call death. And the response of the Lodge to that prayer, as to all others offered at its Altar, is the old, challenging phrase: So Mote it be.

Brother, do not be ashamed to pray, as you are taught in the Lodge and the Church. It is a part of the sweetness and sanity of life, refreshing the soul and making clear the mind. There is more wisdom in a whispered prayer than in all the libraries of the world. It is not our business to instruct God. He knows what things we have need of before we ask Him. He does not need our prayer, but we do – if only to make us acquainted with the best Friend we have.

The greatest of all teachers of the soul left us a little liturgy called the Lord's Prayer. He told us to use it each for himself, in the closet when the door is shut and the din and hum and litter of the world is outside. Try it, Brother; it will sweeten life, make its load lighter, its joy brighter, and the way of duty plainer.

Two tiny prayers have floated down to us from ages ago, which are worth remembering, one by a great saint, the other by two brothers. "Grant me, Lord, ardently to desire, wisely to study, rightly to understand, and perfectly to fulfill that which pleaseth Thee." And the second is after the manner: "May two brothers enjoy and serve Thee together, and so live today that we may be worthy to live tomorrow."

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