

## **The 24-inch gauge: a measure of distance, and time.**

Like most Masonic symbols, it conceals far more than it reveals. Like many, the ritual explanation deals only with the obvious meaning, leaving the inner symbolism buried in the verbiage. Freemasonry discloses to all, if you will but seek the real meaning.

As civilizations began, measuring things seems to have originated among nearly all cultures by using parts of the human body - the foot, the hand, the palm, the digit, and the cubit (measured from the elbow to tip of the middle finger). Some contend that the origin of an inch was actually based on the thumb joint. But what's important is not the name of the measure, but the division of the measuring gauge into units and their applicability to time. The relation of twenty-four inches to the twenty-four hours of the day is certainly obvious enough, but when we examine just what it is that is divided into twenty-four parts, the explanation becomes a bit more difficult.

I recall while in my early teens reading my Dad's paperback books by science fiction writer Isaac Asimov...and afterward my Father and I having some philosophical discussions about the three dimensional world we live in, and my thoughts about the fourth dimension....didn't know we had a fourth dimension, did you? I contend that the fourth dimension is that of 'time'. So, just what is time? To most of us it is the duration between two specific hours...the elapsed interval between any two events; the passage of a certain fraction of life. Ah, yes, but to the philosopher, time is an unknown quantity, and like space, it appears to be a concept of the mind, without objective existence. Modern mathematicians contend that time and space are just two faces of the same concept, like the two sides of a dollar coin. While we can comprehend one without necessarily referencing the other, we cannot "use" one without the other. Every material thing occupies space for a certain time; and in turn every material thing existing for a specified period of time, occupies a certain space.

We, as humans, pass through, or occupy *space*, in three directions - up and down, left and right, forward and back. We pass through *time* continuously - apparently in just one direction....from birth to death. We can't go back even for the smallest fraction of an instant. Actually, having reached this moment in my life, I'm not sure that I want to go back and reclaim any of my time....how about you? From your High school or college English 101 class....you may recall this passage penned by Omar..... "The moving finger writes; and having writ, moves on; nor all piety nor wit shall lure it back to cancel half a Line, nor all your tears wash out a word of it." A subtle reminder that we can never go back and reclaim what has passed.

So, how do measurement and time relate to Freemasonry? The operative workman measures his stone with his gauge; if the ashlar is too long, he shortens it. If it is too broad, he narrows it. If it's too crooked to make square, he casts it on the rubbish heap and begins again with a rough ashlar.

But the Speculative Mason, measuring his time with the twenty-four inch gauge, has no such latitude. The ruined minute is gone forever; the crooked hour can never be made straight. The day that is unfit for the Building Not Made With Hands can never be set in your Eternal Wall.

We have but "...Eight hours for the service of God and the relief of a distressed worthy brother, eight for our usual vocations, and eight for refreshment and sleep." To divide our twenty-four hours into three equal parts is really a very practical, everyday admonition.

The Mason interested in a further interpretation of our twenty-four hours (divided by three) need look no further than the Great Light upon the Altar - indeed, turn back from Ecclesiastes XII to Ecclesiastes III to find the inspiration for this admonition that there is a time for everything. We read: "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silent, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace."

But nowhere in the wise counsel of prophet or patriot, preacher or teacher, is there a time set aside to '...waste time'. Time is the very substance of life; its golden minutes are the only stones we have with which to build. Every accomplishment of man, be it for the Temple of marble or our Temple of character, act of selfishness or selfless giving to others, building a nation or building a house, it must be accomplished with "Time." Without time nothing is ever finished. Hence he who wastes either his time or another's squanders something that he can't recover.

All around us are many different men with just as many different ideas of how time should be spent. Every person has the same number of minutes in an hour, of hours in a day, of days in a year. Some have little or nothing to show for their thirty, forty, or fifty years of work on this mortal coil. Others have great accomplishments, or have left a lasting impression on their fellow man as the product of their time well spent. Albert Pike made himself a learned scholar by constant use of his spare time. This man knew what the twenty-four inch gauge really meant, and how profound a symbol it really is.

It makes you stop and think, soberly I might add, when you apply the Masonic rule to determine just how long we really have. We are told that our days are allotted as three score and ten...or seventy years....a gift of the Lord. We rarely start on our life's work before we are twenty. Of the fifty years of actual time for labor, we are admonished to spend a third of it in the service of God and the relief of a distressed worthy brother, a third in refreshment and sleep, and the remaining third in labor - which leaves us just under seventeen years worth of our time in which to accomplish all that we have to do! No wonder just a few of us will leave behind a monument that will stand long enough to be seen by the coming generation, let alone one that will last through the ages.

If you have been listening closely you have noted how many Masonic allusions there are to 'work', and how few to 'refreshment'. Our twenty-four inch gauge gives us - almost grudgingly, it seems - eight hours for two occupations of which we know one needs the greater part - eight hours for refreshment and sleep. The other sixteen are for the service we can offer, and to our regular labor, our work ethic.

Find the Mason who is truly interested in our gentle craft, you'll find a man who is usually prompt to offer his services for visiting the sick, doing needed committee work, helping the tiler, laboring on a Degree Team. There you'll see one who is happy in his lodge.

Time – the substance of life! Time - gift of the Great Architect! Time – the building stone for your spiritual temple! Time - man's greatest mystery, bitterest enemy, and truest friend! Its care, conservation, and employment are the true secret of the twenty-four inch gauge - its waste and aimless spending is the sin against which this symbolic working tool aligns our Ancient Craft.

The 24-inch gauge...it's an instrument for measuring not just distance.....but also time. And yet, another emblem of time...the Scythe....that cuts the brittle thread of life, wins out in the end. Oh, indeed we can race with Father Time...but just for a little while.

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