

Lesson 57

A Psalm of Life

Class Discussion

Background. The renowned Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) wrote this classic poem as a young man. His wife had died suddenly in 1835, and three years later the poet was still grieving over his loss. But one morning the thought came to him that this could not go on. There was much to accomplish in life; he must be up and doing! Longfellow seized his pen and started writing in a surge of inspiration; his pen could hardly keep up with his racing thoughts.

The author was reluctant to show the poem to anyone at first; for, as he later said, "It was a voice from my inmost heart, at a time when I was rallying from depression." But when he did allow it to be published, the poem quickly became famous throughout the United States and England. It was translated into more than half a dozen different languages and even became popular in Chinese. "A Psalm of Life" was memorized by thousands of students in schools of past generations; and it would be good if every student in school today would do the same.

The soul that slumbers. Longfellow may have felt that his own soul had been slumbering during his past three years of mourning. But now he seemed to realize that the real purpose of living is "not enjoyment, and not sorrow" (stanza 3), but to live and act in the present, for the benefit of mankind and the glory of God.

"Dust thou art, to dust returnest." This is an allusion to Genesis 3:19. "Be not like dumb, driven cattle" seems like an echo of Psalm 32:9; and "Let the dead Past bury its dead" alludes to Matthew 8:22.

"Footprints in the sands of time." This phrase has become a very common figure of speech. Many people probably use it, or even quote the entire stanza, without realizing that it comes from a longer poem. The picture in this and the following stanza is that of a sailor who has been shipwrecked—perhaps on a desert island—but whose hope is renewed by footprints in the sand. In another sense, our influence in the world is like tracks in sand because it is helpful to those who come immediately after us; but it is soon obscured and forgotten.