

A PSALM OF LIFE

“A Psalm of Life” is an inspiring poem written by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The poem was **first published** in the October 1838 issue of The Knickerbocker or New-York Monthly Magazine, a magazine published in the New York City.

A psalm is a religious or sacred song or hymn, in particular any of those contained in the biblical Book of Psalms and used in Christian and Jewish worship. But here **the meaning** of “a psalm of life” is a song of life, where the poet glorifies life and its possibilities. It is an invocation to mankind to follow the path of righteousness, the right way to live this life. The poem is **didactic** in tone.

The poem ‘A Psalm of Life’ often takes the subtitle “**What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist**“. This is very important in suggesting the context of writing this poem. Here, the speaker (a young man) responds to the Biblical teachings that this human life is not important and that we are made of dust and eventually return to dust. So, we may take it as a psalm in response to a psalm.

In the poem, A Psalm of Life, the poet sees life from **an optimistic outlook**. To him this life is full of possibilities, as we can achieve higher goals by making the full use of our time and by working hard, and of course, by keeping faith in the power and potential of life. He does not have faith in those who hold the pessimistic view of life.

Throughout the entire poem, the poet Longfellow conveys his view of life, instructs the readers to make the most out of this life, and inspires us to participate in the work and activity of life.

The poem consists of nine stanzas of four lines. The poem is also lyrical in nature. The **rhyme scheme** followed is A B A B, where the last words of the first line and the third line rhyme, and alternatively the second and the fourth line rhyme in each stanza.

A Psalm of life: Summary and Line-by-Line Analysis

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,

Life is but an empty dream!

For the soul is dead that slumbers,

And things are not what they seem.

The poem begins with a verb 'Tell' in an imperative manner. And the very first sentence strikes the positive keynote of the poem. It also indicates that the poet is going to give us some instructions on what this life actually is and how we should take it. The poet asks us not to tell him in sorrowful verses that life is a hollow and meaningless dream. Here Longfellow slams the pessimists who sing melancholy songs, write sad poems, or thinks that nothing can be achieved in this life. According to the poet, a person who spends all his time sleeping is already dead. Such worthless examples of life often misguide others. And he assures that life is not so shady or worthless as it looks like, and it has much more potential than we think of.

Life is real! Life is earnest!

And the grave is not its goal;

Dust thou art, to dust returnest,

Was not spoken of the soul.

The second stanza begins with the line, 'Life is real! Life is earnest!' This also conveys the poet's positive attitude towards life. According to him life is real and serious, not baseless or useless. So we should not take this life lightly. To him, grave is not the ultimate goal of life; life does not end with death. He wants to indicate that our works remain in this world even after our death. He thinks, "Dust thou art, to dust thou returnest" (You are made of dust, and you will go back to dust after death) is only spoken of the body and it is not applicable to

the soul. So the poet makes it clear that he believes in the existence of the soul after our death.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,

Is our destined end or way;

But to act, that each to-morrow

Find us farther than to-day.

The third stanza of A Psalm of Life is about the ideal way of living. The poet suggests that neither enjoyment, nor sorrow should be our ultimate aim or way of life. He means to say that in an ideal life there should be both enjoyment and sorrow in a balanced way. But that is not crucial. The most important thing is to work, and work diligently so that we can always be a better-learned, better-skilled and better-mannered human being with every passing day. The poet in The Psalm of Life doesn't want us to waste even a single day. We should crave for going forward farther each day in our journey of life.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,

And our hearts, though stout and brave,

Still, like muffled drums, are beating

Funeral marches to the grave.

The fourth stanza of the poem A Psalm of Life is about our responsibilities in this life, about the work assigned to us. "Art is long, and Time is fleeting" means that the work given to us is vast and time consuming, but the time is running away fast with every moment. The poet then says that though our hearts are brave and stout at other times, we fear death and our heart beats when we realize that Death is certainly coming our way bit by bit. Longfellow compares this situation of our heart to the beating of the clothed drums at the funeral marches to the grave. Here he means to say that we should utilize our

limited time span to the fullest instead of wasting it in the thought of death or other such thing.

In the world's broad field of battle,

In the bivouac of Life,

Be not like dumb, driven cattle!

Be a hero in the strife!

In the above stanza of A Psalm of Life, the poet compares this world to a vast battlefield where we, the human beings come temporarily in the camps to fight the battle of our life. So the human beings are compared with troops. The poet urges us to be a hero in this battle of life, to fight this out bravely and finally win it. In other words, he wishes us to be successful in life by following the right way of life. He doesn't like to see us like the dumb cattle driven by others, with no particular goal or direction.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!

Let the dead Past bury its dead!

Act,— act in the living Present!

Heart within, and God o'erhead!

In the sixth stanza of the poem A Psalm of life, the poet reminds us of a very popular quote: "Learn from the past, live in the present, and hope for the future." But here the poet instructs us not to trust the future, however pleasant it may seem, because we often get carried away by the happy dreams about our future and forget to act in the present. He also tells us to forget the past events, as they are dead, and they should not haunt us anymore and affect our present action. And what is crucial is to act in the present, 'in the living Present!' We have to follow our heart, and keep faith in the God overhead.

Lives of great men all remind us

We can make our lives sublime,

And, departing, leave behind us

Footprints on the sands of time;

In the seventh stanza of the poem, the poet says that the lives of so many great and successful men remind us that we can also achieve those heights if we wish and strive for that. And if we can do that, we would be living forever in our works, in the hearts of people.

Longfellow compares this immortality to leaving footprints on the sands of time. In other words, we will not be living forever here, but we can leave our marks on the infinite flow of time through our good work. That would inspire later generations to follow our way.

Footprints, that perhaps another,

Sailing o'er life's solemn main,

A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,

Seeing, shall take heart again.

In the penultimate stanza of A Psalm of life, the poet continues the same theme of leaving a 'footprint' to inspire others to follow. He compares a dejected or wretched person with a hopeless shipwrecked man sailing over the large sea of life ('life's solemn main'). That person can find the examples set by us, and can gain courage and hope to move forward.

Let us, then, be up and doing,

With a heart for any fate;

Still achieving, still pursuing,

Learn to labor and to wait.

In the final four lines of A Psalm of Life, the poet Longfellow asks us to be up at once and start working. However, the poet here urges us not to mind the consequences, or, to make our mind prepared for any fate. We must carry on, reaching great heights, still not leaving. We must learn to labour, to work hard, to act wisely, and wait for the rewards patiently.

So, going through this poem, we now realize how inspiring and motivating this poem has been. The poet conveys his message all over the poem. But I feel, the first two lines, and the very last line of the poem are enough to give an impression of what this poem is all about: we should not spend our priceless moments sitting idly and doing nothing, rather we have to work hard towards reaching our goal and to make the most out of this short life.