

Psalm 90: The Eternality of God and the Brevity of Life



PSALM 90: THE ETERNITY OF GOD AND BREVITY OF LIFE

Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.



1. INTRODUCTION

a. The Authorship of the Psalm:

The psalm is the first psalm in Book 5 of the Psalter, corresponding to the book of Leviticus. It is attributed to "Moses, the man of God." C. H. Spurgeon has rightly said, "Moses was peculiarly a man of God and God's man; chosen of God, inspired of God, honoured of God, and faithful to God in all his house, he well deserved the name which is here given him."

b. The Antiquity of the Psalm:

Next to the book of Job, Psalm 90 is most likely the oldest piece of writing in the Bible. This psalm and probably the anonymous one which follows were written by Moses in the wilderness on the way from Egypt to Canaan.

Psalm 90 stands in grand isolation as the oldest psalm in history, one of the grandest psalms ever penned, and the first great masterpiece of the Hebrew hymn book.

Spurgeon comments that "this is the oldest of the Psalms, and stands between the two books of psalms as a composition unique in its grandeur, and alone in its sublime antiquity. Many generations of mourners have listened to the Psalm when standing around the open grave, and have been consoled thereby, even when they have not perceived its special application to Israel in the wilderness and have failed to remember the far higher ground upon which believers now stand." (*Psalm 90 Bible Commentary*, introduced by Charles H. Spurgeon, in his *Treasury of David*, this is the oldest Psalm).

c. The Occasion of the Psalm:

The context of the Psalm indicates that Moses wrote this Psalm at the end of the 40 years of Wilderness Wanderings. At the time he wrote this Psalm, the Exodus Generation had passed away; the judgment of the sin at Kadesh Barnea had run its course; and the Wilderness Generation was soon to enter the land. So this Psalm is written from the background of the sin of Kadesh Barnea. What was the sin of Kadesh Barnea? The account is given in Number 13-14. The Jewish people had finally arrived at the oasis of Kadesh Barnea, bordering the Promised Land. In other words, once they walked past Kadesh, they would be in the Promised Land. From that spot, Moses designated twelve men to spy out the land. They returned 40 days later and all agreed on one issue: the land had everything God promised; it was a "land which flows with milk and honey." Alas, there was a crucial point of disagreement. Ten of the spies said the inhabitants of the land were numerically and militarily too strong for the Israelites to conquer them. Only two spies, Joshua and Caleb, told the people that God would enable His people to take the Land. In Numbers 13:30, they said, "We are well able to overcome it."

At this point, God pronounced a special judgment on the Exodus Generation. All those who came out of Egypt would have to continue wandering in the wilderness until 40 years were completed, 40 years for the 40 days the spies were in the land. During those 40 years, everyone who came out of Egypt would die, except for Joshua and Caleb, the two good spies, and those people under age 20. It would not be the Exodus Generation but the Wilderness Generation who had the privilege to enter the Land under Joshua.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum makes some very interesting calculations concerning the number of people who would die during the wilderness wanderings:

The Exodus Generation, then, was under a sentence of physical death in the wilderness, meaning they would die outside the Land. Based upon the population numbers given in the Book of Numbers, this means that Moses saw the death of about 1,200,000 people in a period of thirty-eight years. This would be the entire adult population that left Egypt, from the age of twenty upward. The wilderness, which was intended to be simply a place of passing through to a new land, had become a huge cemetery. "What does it mean to have 1,200,000 people die in a period of thirty-eight years?" It means that 31,580 people died per year. More specifically, it means that eighty-seven people died every single day, eighty-seven funerals per day, all because of the sin at Kadesh Barnea.

Having witnessed this tremendous death toll, Moses reflects and writes Psalm 90. In order to understand Psalm 90, this background must be understood, that Moses wrote it at the end of the forty years of Wilderness Wanderings and at the end of seeing an entire generation die away in the wilderness, including members of his own family, Aaron and Miriam among them. (*Psalm 90: An Exposition*, NBS 84, 4)



d. The Uniqueness of the Psalm:

Psalm 90 is unique. For example, no statement in this Psalm is taken from any of the other Psalms, whereas many thoughts or terms in the Psalms repeat themselves. Furthermore, Psalm 90 has no affinity with any of the other Psalms, meaning that it does not cover any similar circumstances.

As far as the poetic beauty is concerned, Isaac Taylor has praised this Psalm as "the most sublime of human compositions, the deepest in feeling, the loftiest in theological conception, the most magnificent in its imagery" (cited by Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms*, 1965, 239).

Some commentators have pointed out that Psalms 90 and 91 answer the two clauses in Moses' Farewell Blessing on Israel (Deut. 33:27)

The Eternal God is thy dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

Psalm 90 develops the first of these lines and Psalm 91 develops the second.

Scroggie has well said: "In light of the idea that the five Books of the Psalter answer in order to the Book of the Pentateuch, it is significant that the first Psalm of Book Four should so perfectly reflect the story of Israel. As it is set forth in Numbers, and reviewed in Deuteronomy." (*The Psalms*, 240).

e. **The Familiarity of the Psalm:**

The hymn of Isaac Watts, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," one of the finest in the English language, is inspired by this Psalm. Who does not appreciate this superb English hymn?

O God, Our Help in Ages Past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

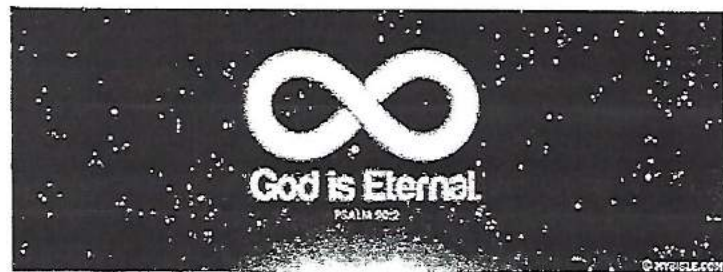
Under the shadow of Thy throne,
Still may we dwell secure,
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

(notice the entire hymn based on Psalm 90 in the appendix)

2. THE OUTLINE OF THE PSALM:

Commentators sometimes see three, sometimes four or five major points. Our outline will be

- 1A. The Eternality of God, 1-2
- 2A. The Frailty of Man, 3-6
- 3A. The Sinfulness of Humanity, 7-8
- 4A. The Brevity of Life, 9-12
- 5A. The Prayer for God's Grace, 13-17



John Phillips, in his superb commentary on Psalm 90, sees the following main points:

- 1. The Right Perspective: 90:1-6
- 2. The Real Problem: 90:7-12
- 3. The Resulting Prayer: 90:13-17



1A. The Eternality of God: 1-2

Moses addresses God not as **Elohim**, the Mighty, or **Jehovah**, the Helper, but as **Adonai**, the Master.

- 1b. God, the dwelling place: 1
Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.

The term "dwelling place" means "a protective shelter." God has been Israel's protective shelter for all generations, from the time of Abraham, the Father of the Jewish people. Deut. 33:27 states:

The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them.

This shows the Mosaic authorship of both passages. Although God is lofty, He is not inaccessible. He is reachable. He is always there for those willing to approach Him on His basis: the basis of faith.

2b. God, the eternal 2

²Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

In Deut. 33:15 the ancient mountains are the witnesses to God's covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. But, says the Psalmist, God is even older than the mountains, as the second phrase of the verse states, "for ever had you formed the earth and the world." Moses further describes God's eternality as being "from everlasting to everlasting," meaning from eternity past to eternity future. Before time was, time shall be no more. He concludes, "you are God." This eternality of God the Psalmist contrasts with the transitoriness of man.

2A. The Frailty of Man: 3-6

1b. The transitoriness of man: 3

Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

Man was made from dust, he is destined to return to pulverized dust. Moses then points out that God calls men to repentance, because the purpose of divine judgment was always to bring one to repentance.

2b. The timelessness of God: 4

⁴For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

Moses uses two phrases to describe what a thousand years is in God's sight. The first phrase is "**are but as yesterday when it is past.**" A thousand years with God is like only a night in the life of man. And a thousand years is **like a watch in the night**. The first watch was from sunset to 10 PM; the second watch from 10 PM till 2 AM; the third from 2AM till sunrise. What are a thousand years in God's sight? Merely four hours of human life.

3b. The certainty of death: 5

⁵Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.

Moses emphasizes the fact of the certainty of death. Death will eventually take all away. He refers to sleep, which here is the sleep of death.

- 4b. The shortness of life: 6

⁶In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

The emphasis here is that the length of man's life is short-lived. Ordinarily a teenager has no consciousness of how short life really is. He knows he will die someday, but that day is very, very far away. The productivity of man is limited to a relatively brief lifespan. It is important that we carefully plan our lives to make them productive for the Lord.

3A. The Sinfulness of Humanity: 7-8

- 1b. The reason for man's untimely death:

For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum relates the reason for this untimely death:

This is Moses' recognition of the results of the sin of Kadesh Barnea: that many of these people could have lived a lot longer, but by God's judgment 1,200,000 had to die during a period of 38 years. Many died simply of natural causes, but the wilderness accounts of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers also reveal that people often died by direct, divine judgment because of sin. So Moses states: *in your wrath are we troubled*, hurried away in untimely death. This is Moses' own conclusion of his observations of the sin of Kadesh Barnea (*Op.cit.* 8).

- 2b. The reason for man's judgment: 8

⁸Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.

In verse 8 man's secret sins might be hid from man, but they are not hid from God's sight. God brings them to light for the purpose of punishment.

4A. The Brevity of Life: 9-12

For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

¹⁰The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

¹¹Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.

¹²So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Humans only live a short time because God judges the sin of their lives (Rom. 6:23). God knows even our secret sins. They do not escape Him, and He judges us with physical death for our sins.

It is interesting that Moses said the normal life span is seventy years. He lived to be 120 years, Aaron was 120 years old when he died, and Joshua died at age 110. Their long lives testify to God's grace in providing longevity to the godly, as He promised under the Mosaic covenant.

Dispensationally, it needs to be noted that God made a healing covenant with Israel. A Jew who obeyed the Lord could expect to have a long and healthy life. Note the compact with God's earthly people in Exodus 15:26:



If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee.

The same promise is indicated in **Proverbs 3:1-2**. My son, forget not my law; but let thy heart keep my commandments: for length of days, and long life and peace, shall they add unto thee. **Proverbs 3:7-8**. Fear the Lord and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones. — The longevity of Moses, Aaron, Joshua and Caleb illustrate this truth.

The Old Testament believer in the Jewish economy could expect a healthy and long life as a response to obedience to God's commands. There is no such promise given to the church age believer. It is important, therefore, to note these dispensational distinctions.

It is of great importance to heed verse 12, "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." As Dr. Unger stresses:

To reckon each one of them as a precious gift from the Lord, to make us know the power of God's anger, as caused by our sin and none of us within our short-lived and frail existence (*Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1981, 879).

5A. The Prayer for God's Grace: 13-17

Return, O Lord, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.

¹⁴ O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

¹⁵ Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.

¹⁶ Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.

¹⁷ And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

The final section of the Psalm relates to Moses' prayer for God's grace. But while these verses are self-explanatory, it might be good to include here some very practical recommendations why the believer should number his days. Crystal McDowell gives several reasons why the believer should remember the brevity of his life. Below is an adaptation and expansion of her discussion which is found under "What Christians Want to Know."

Seven Good Reasons to Number Our Days:

1. Tomorrow isn't promised to you.

James 4:14 Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

The sudden death of a loved one reminds us of our mortality on this earth. How could it be that someone we see with life be dead in minutes or days? Yet it happens every day and we are reminded that we must work every day for the Lord as if it were our last. Not in a frenzied pace, but rather thoughtful and careful consideration to how we spend our days as we don't know for sure it could be our last one on this earth.

2. **Life on earth could be shorter than you think.**

Luke 12:20 But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

The rich fool invested much of his time and effort towards building earthly riches—only to find himself unable to breathe one moment longer than God allowed. We are not only aware of our own mortality but of the brevity of life of people younger than us. We can be responsible in our savings, investing, and preparing for our families just in case the Lord calls us home. However we must also spiritually invest enough so that we won't be lacking in heaven due to poor planning.

3. **Many missed opportunities can't be restored.**

Heb. 3:15 While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation.

The problem with decisions we make in life is that we may not always get a second chance. If we miss opportunities of divine callings, we may never get to redo that moment. When Moses hit the rock instead of speaking to it, God wouldn't allow him to enter the Promised Land even though Moses begged him to change His mind. While there is hope even after a missed calling, we must make the most of every opportunity.

4. **Relationships with family and friends could end without warning.**

Heb. 3:13 But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

We can easily take our family and friends for granted—assuming that they will always be around and available. Yet that is not the case, our closest companions could be snatched away at a moment's notice and we don't want our last memory to be overwhelmed with regret. We love, hug, and speak tenderly to those who God has placed us around knowing that we don't always get a second chance in our relationships.

5. **All earthly possessions have limited value compared to heavenly rewards.**

Luke 12:15 And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

Most of us have to work in one way or another to provide for ourselves and our family members. However we must remember that our earthly possessions aren't going with us to heaven. We have need of things for survival, yet we must be careful to not put too

much value into them. Instead we should use our financial increases to further the gospel of Jesus—leading to the eternal rewards of seeing many people come to Christ.

6. Future reward awaits those who make the most of their time in the Lord.

1 Cor. 3:12-13 Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; ¹³ Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is.

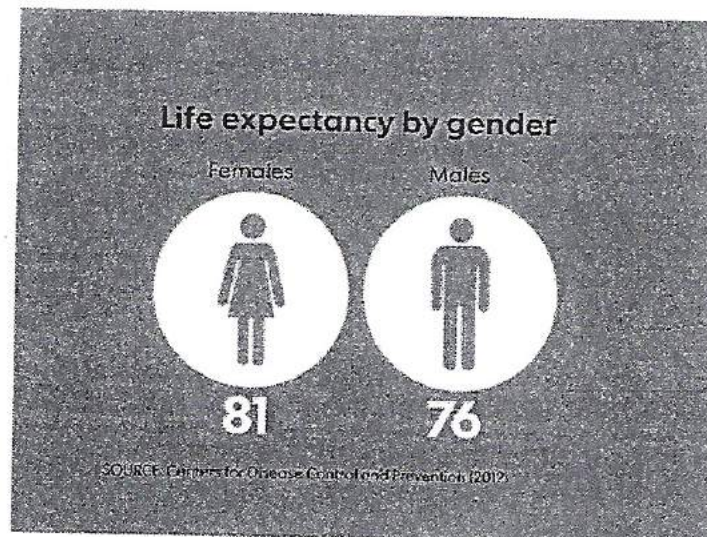
There are rewards for those who are in Christ Jesus. He will give to each of us based on the measure of the work we completed in His name. We number our days in order to accommodate God's will and plan for our lives. Just as getting a promotion and pay raise are significant in this world—it will be of even more significance when we get to heaven.

7. Today is the time to respond to the Gospel since delay might have eternal consequences.

2 Cor. 6:2 Behold, **now** is the **accepted time**; behold, **now** is the day of salvation.

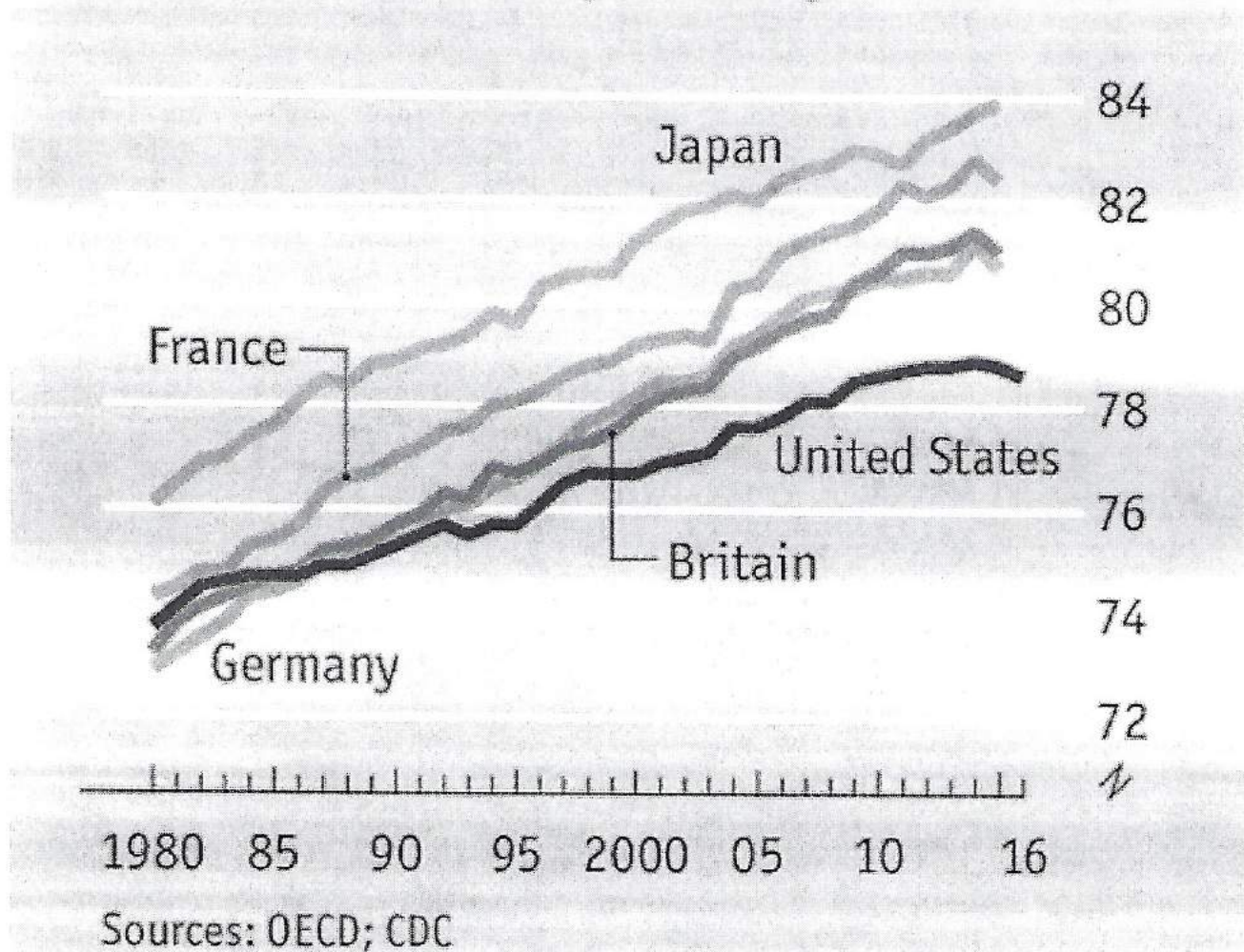
The individual needs to respond to the Gospel today. As stated above, there are no guarantees that you will live to see another day and since each day brings us closer to eternity, it is of the highest importance to take stock of one's life and to respond in faith to the salvation offered by Jesus Christ to anyone who trusts in Him, thus being assured of an eternity with Him. Waiting an extra day without responding in faith to the free gift of salvation might mean an eternity of separation from the Savior and the saints in a place of indescribable torment. (Note the urgent repetition of "**today**" in Hebrews 3:7, 13, 15).

**Take time in time while time shall last,
For time is no time when time is past.**



Wrong turn

Average life expectancy at birth, years



Economist.com

The steepest rise in mortality was among 25- to 34-year-olds. In that age group deaths per 100,000 people from any cause increased by 11% from 2015 to 2016. Mortality from drug overdoses in the same age group shot up by 50% from 2014 to 2016.

At the same time, the decrease in mortality from heart disease and cancer—which has been a chief driver of the steady increase in life expectancy—has begun to level off. As a result, further increases in overdose deaths would probably push life expectancy down again. A decline for three straight years was last seen in America a century ago, when the Spanish flu pandemic ravaged the world.

Psalm and Hymns of Isaac Watts

PSALM 90 PART 1

v.1-5

Man frail, and God eternal.

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home.

Under the shadow of thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is thine arm alone,
And our defence is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting thou art God,
To endless years the same.

Thy word commands our flesh to dust,
"Return, ye sons of men;"
All nations rose from earth at first,
And turn to earth again.

A thousand ages in thy sight
Are like an evening gone;
Short as the watch that ends the night
Before the rising sun.

[The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by the flood,
And lost in following years.

Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the op'ning day.

Like flowery fields the nations stand
Pleased with the morning light;
The flowers beneath the mower's hand
Lie with'ring ere 'tis night.]

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be thou our guard while troubles last,
And our eternal home.

PSALM 90 PART 2

v.8-12

Infirmities and mortality the effect of sin.

Lord, if thine eye surveys our faults,
And justice grows severe,
Thy dreadful wrath exceeds our thoughts,
And burns beyond our fear.

Thine anger turns our frame to dust;
By one offence to thee
Adam with all his sons have lost
Their immortality.

Life, like a vain amusement, flies,
A fable or a song;
By swift degrees our nature dies,
Nor can our joys be long.

'Tis but a few whose days amount
To threescore years and ten;
And all beyond that short account
Is sorrow, toil, and pain.

[Our vitals with laborious strife
Bear up the crazy load,
And drag those poor remains of life
Along the tiresome road.]

Almighty God, reveal thy love,
And not thy wrath alone;
O let our sweet experience prove
The mercies of thy throne!

Our souls would learn the heav'nly art
T' improve the hours we have,
That we may act the wiser part,
And live beyond the grave.