

Deadlines

by Joseph B. Baity

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“So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.” —Psalm 90:12

Not long ago, scientists at UCLA released several interesting findings from an ongoing, long-term study of human aging. They followed 13,000 people to determine the key factors in human DNA that influence the aging process and whether science could discover a way to slow it down and extend life.

What they found was intriguing. While environmental factors—lifestyle, diet, smoking, and the like—have a significant influence on health and thus lifespan, they also discovered that, inherent among all humans, was a sort of innate biological clock.

The Guardian (UK) [noted](#):

Scientists have found the most definitive evidence yet that some people are destined to age quicker and die younger than others—regardless of their lifestyle. The findings could explain the seemingly random and unfair way that death is sometimes dealt out. . . . Wolf Reik, a professor of epigenetics at the University of Cambridge, . . . said: “It now looks like you get a clock given to you when you’re young. It gets wound up and the pace it’s ticking at is dictated by this epigenetic machinery.”

It is always fun when science discovers a fact we have known since our calling—that God knows the span of our lives (Psalm 37:18; 139:16). We have all been given a genetic alarm clock, a congenital deadline to work with.

The story explores the possibility of manipulating our DNA to override this biological clock. The outlook is “promising,” depending, of course, upon one’s point of view. But there is no end to the effort people will make to extend a deadline!

This story is intriguing in the context of the human desire to predict the future to gain an advantage, to make life a little easier, to find the answer to the question, “How long will I live?” In this vein, we might ask, “How much time do we have left to complete the work given to us? When does Christ return?”

Included with our calling is an immense weight attached to the date of our death, for the day of our physical death signals the completion of our judgment. Our time is up, the test is over, and the die is cast for good or for bad.

Where Should Our Focus Be?

Psalm 90:12-13 (*International Standard Version*, [ISV]) provides some eloquent, thought-provoking wisdom:

Teach us to keep account of our days so we may develop inner wisdom. Please return, LORD! When will it be? Comfort your servants.

Many of us, by the very nature of our calling, are constantly pondering the future, wondering when or if we will experience the absolute end of the age—the return of Christ—before we die. This is a good thing. God provided the prophetic books and scriptures for a good reason.

He also created time, giving each of us a biological clock without telling us what time He set the alarm for. As important as our future is, the fact remains that we live in the present. Moses, the author of Psalm 90, acknowledged this congenital deadline, teaching us that the decisions we make presently and our current behavior will determine how our heavenly Father will judge us tomorrow.

It inspires a few questions: Are our priorities straight? Do our lives reflect a strong desire and sense of urgency to pursue holiness and righteousness, to resolve now the troubling issues of our walk? Or do we worry more about how much time we have left to figure all this out?

In other words, should we focus on the project or the deadline?

Human nature has grappled with this question for a long time. Today, those who teach, evaluate, or judge us consider *both* the quality of the work and meeting the deadline to be critical factors.

In school, where we learn how to engage in and complete various assignments, we have the added assistance of a faculty that provides frameworks for learning. They provide us with updates and evaluations of our progress as the school years unfold: Our tests are graded, and we receive periodic report cards. Our final grades rarely come as a surprise or shock.

But, how do we, as God's elect, regard and measure or evaluate what He requires us to experience and accomplish during our walk in this physical realm? Does our "spiritual assignment" consist of a series of grade levels and tests like our experiences in school? It seems so easy to judge or evaluate everyone else's lives and their fruit, good or bad. But without a report card from God, how do we measure our own progress or lack thereof? How do we measure or channel our efforts when our individual "assignments" are not, per se, graded?

In fact, we do not even know what class we are in, how many classes there are, or how many grade levels there are! We have no idea if this class has ended or the next one has just begun. Can we complete the working out of our own salvation early? Is there extra credit available? Is there a minimum number of spiritual credits required for graduation? Does God grade on a curve?

These questions may seem a little silly, but much of the world thinks this way. Moreover, this world has a major impact on how we think—how we approach any quest, challenge, or assignment. As the end of this age nears, we face peril and chaos as never before, which, if we are uncertain of our path, can easily lead us astray.

What Is the Nature of Our Spiritual Education?

Thus, it is wise—even crucial—for us to ponder the nature of our spiritual education. What do we really think is happening to us? Why has God chosen the specific path for us that He has? Should we move forward a little faster, a little slower, or do we need to repeat a grade? Are we retaining what we need to move ahead?

Are we devoting enough time to study? Have we discovered any of the gifts God has specifically given us for our growth and edification in serving others? Have we practiced using these gifts enough? Are we handling and resolving our weaknesses? Have we repented of all our sins? Are we making good progress, or are we getting a failing grade?

We have much to consider, and without a few answers, anxiety or complacency can easily set in.

Another psalm, this one by David, will help us start answering some of these questions:

LORD, let me know how my life ends, and the standard by which you will measure my days, whatever it is! Then I will know how transient my life is. Look, you have made my life span fit in your hand; it is nothing compared to yours. Surely every person at their best is a puff of wind. (Psalm 39:4-5, ISV)

As he composed this psalm, David was experiencing something common to all Christians: a little insecurity. Regardless of how long any of us has been at this, we rarely feel like we have it all figured out. In fact, such confidence is likely a sign of bigger problems!

David asked God for standards, a way to measure himself with regard to his assignment—his works—as well as his deadline. Like us, he knew that his calling was, in essence, an assignment to learn how to submit to the will of God. This assignment, unique to God's elect, comes with the ultimate

deadline: death. Whether we die before the end, or we are quickened at Christ's return, our perception will be the same: that only in the moments following our death will we learn of our eternal fate.

Our time for this physical life will have ended, and our time for judgment will have passed. Either we will have worked out our salvation (Philippians 2:12), or we will have failed. Momentarily, we will experience either indescribable joy or unspeakable horror and regret.

In the meantime, what should be going through our minds leading all the way up to that moment? Will we—should we—be filled with anxiety? Does God want us to be anxious over our respective deadlines?

How Long, O Lord?

There is a thought exercise that can help a person change his current perspective. It serves to start a process that leads to deeper self-examination and, hopefully, a few answers to some of these questions. It can be an effective way for a person to examine his sense of urgency and priorities regarding his individual sanctification journey.

Imagine that a highly respected church leader stood before us and announced, to our complete satisfaction, that he had learned of the date of Christ's return. (We know, per Matthew 24:36 and Mark 13:32, that we do not know the day or the hour, but just for the purpose of this exercise, please accept the premise.) The leader informs us that we have six years left, to the day, until the return of Christ—six full years.

What would go through our minds knowing this fixed point? Six years is still a good amount of time for most Christians to prepare, if we stay motivated and focused. There would be no immediate need for drastic change—not this day, this week, or even this month.

Most people would keep their jobs and keep the kids in school. They would continue with their daily routines, at least in the short term, and likely feel a sense of contentment, knowing they had the answer to a very important question.

Now imagine that the church leader said not six years but six *months*.

That deadline is *a lot* closer! It would come as a great shock. Most church members' thought processes would go into high gear as they considered the many things they needed to change in their current lifestyles. We would have additional urgency to resolve old feuds or misunderstandings. We would try to figure out a way to apologize to people we know we hurt. Most would feel a need to increase their prayer and study time.

With only six months left, we would feel a strong sense of urgency, but many of us might keep our jobs for a few months, since most live paycheck to paycheck. Most would cancel their next dental appointment and forget about buying that new car, but most would maintain their short-term plans. Some people's minds would consider attempting to say goodbye to unconverted family or old friends in the world. For others, a last trip to a favorite spot would be in order.

Six months would allow for that. We would feel a need to change, but we could still find a moment to breathe.

But what if we had only *six days*?

Would anything else in life even matter? With only six days, every minute—every second!—counts. Would we even bother going home, or would we remain at church in prayer, study, and praise until the end? Would we hesitate to resolve anything that might stand in our way of attaining eternal life? None of us would return to work, and there would be no need to check the mail or pay the bills. We might make a few phone calls to family or old friends, but we would be extremely careful not to allow our thoughts to stray too far from our relationship with God and with each other.

Where Do We Stand?

Here is the point of the exercise: Did we discover significant differences in our thoughts and responses across the three different deadlines? Does that concern us? Should it?

Regardless of one's spiritual status with God, common sense would dictate a few differences. Truly, there are no predetermined, correct, one-size-fits-all answers. However, the exercise prompts an important line of thought: In our relationship with God, each of us must consider and determine where we stand in relation to the path He has given us to walk.

There is a ditch if we stray to the left and a ditch if we stray to the right. Are we too casual about our calling? Do we think we have plenty of time? Do we believe we are in solid spiritual shape right now? Are we too focused on the deadline or falling into the trap of putting off the day of judgment? Each of us must answer such questions for ourselves.

The thought exercise shows that everyone needs to devise techniques to alter their perspective of themselves from time to time. We must shake ourselves up a little bit, or as Paul told Timothy, to "stir up the gift of God which is in you" (I Timothy 1:6).

In Ecclesiastes 3, we learn "to everything there is a season," including a desire to learn how we are doing spiritually and the number of our days. If we think about it, how difficult life would become and how great a distraction it would be if one knew the day of his death from early in life!

As for a spiritual report card, we know God does not hand them out, but if we remain close to Him, He is faithful to reveal our spiritual status. Every Christian has experienced His miraculous interventions in his life. Further, Hebrews 12:5-8 and Revelation 3:19 inform us that God also rebukes and chastens those He loves. So, if we are working to stay close to God and striving to complete our assignments and tests in righteousness, we can anticipate occasional pleasant and unpleasant happenings to help us gauge our growth.

We should never find ourselves hopelessly lost or confused about how God views us: He loves us as He loves Christ (John 17:23). He will do His utmost to keep us headed in the right direction, as He says in Isaiah 30:21 (ISV): "And whether you turn to the right or turn to the left, your ears will hear a message behind you: This is the way, walk you in it."

Since our human existence is not eternal, this verse contains an implied sense of urgency. We all have deadlines to meet, but we must realize that too much urgency can turn into anxiety, and not enough can lead to equally dangerous complacency. Either way, we start to produce bad fruit.

Staying close to our Father provides us with perspective and balance, and we discover a special peace when we work within the balance of God's design. In John 14:27, Christ assures us: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

So, within that context, God has not created some preconceived basket of assignments, along with certificates of completion, diplomas, or merit badges that we will need to receive before admittance to His Kingdom. Yes, He assigns us tests, challenges, and trials all within a framework of time—a deadline. But He does this, not to haunt us in our sleep each night, but to keep us moving at a proper pace in the right direction, that He may assist us in the development of the righteous character we will all need for entrance into the Kingdom of God.