



TIME AND **PRIORITY** **MANAGEMENT**

"SEE THEN THAT YOU WALK CIRCUMSPECTLY, NOT AS FOOLS
BUT AS WISE, REDEEMING THE TIME, BECAUSE THE DAYS ARE
EVIL" (EPHESIANS 5:15-16).

BY ISAIAH-PHILLIPS AKINTOLA

Time and Priority Management:

A Biblical Perspective

By Isaiah-Phillips Akintola | PortalsGate Publications

Time is a divine commodity, and most of us spend it before we have understood its value in our lives. Each person receives a day in equal measure. No one can save it, borrow against it, or recover what has been spent. Moses prayed, "So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). The prayer places wisdom in the ability to count our days, which means a person who has never reckoned with the limit of his time has not yet gained the wisdom the psalm describes.

Waste rarely announces itself. One afternoon given to the wrong thing looks harmless, and so does the next. The loss accumulates until we look at the years behind us and recognize that we have been travelling on the wrong track. Scripture describes the same experience: "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death" (Proverbs 14:12). The mercy of God allows a change of direction, and repentance includes the willingness to correct the course of our days. Yet we are better served when we wake ourselves early, before the end of the road exposes the mistake.

Paul gives the instruction directly: "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16). The Greek word behind redeeming means to buy up or buy back, and it describes the purchase of an opportunity out of the hands of loss. We redeem time when we assign it to purpose. Paul gives the reason as well. The days are evil, which describes an environment that consumes hours and leaves nothing to show for them.

Time also functions as an investment, and the return does not always arrive as money. A season at a workplace where the salary falls short of what we wanted can still produce wisdom, knowledge, experience, and relationships. Each of these adds to our life and prepares us for the next place. The measure of time well spent is whether it added to our growth, our development, our maturity, and the fulfilment of God's intention for us, whatever form the return took.

Purpose as the Basis of Priority

Priority is an order. It settles what comes first, what comes second, and what comes last. An order needs a standard, and the standard for the believer is purpose, the reason God placed us on the earth. Paul writes, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). The works were prepared before we arrived, so our task is to discover them and to arrange our days around them.

Without that standard every demand looks equally urgent. A person who ranks everything equally ends up frustrated, overwhelmed, and anxious, because no one has enough time to answer every call. The order of priority gives the day its shape. Solomon wrote, "To everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). A season belongs to a purpose, and a purpose can only be served in its season.

Priority also exposes what we truly value. If we say a thing matters to us and it always receives the last portion of our hours, it sits low on our scale regardless of what we say. Things that matter belong at the front of our life and should receive more of our time. Jesus gave the governing principle: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). What is sought first sets the order for everything that follows.

This calls for honest questions. What matters to you as a man, or as a woman? What matters to you as a leader, and as a brother or sister on the journey? What should matter in your daily life? We cannot arrange our time until we can answer these questions, because each answer becomes a place on the scale.

The Peripheries of Life and the Discipline of Attention

Attention draws on everything we have. When something captures the mind, it receives our energy, our creativity, our resources, and our sense of involvement. The mind gives itself fully to whatever holds it, and this is why attention is the first place where time is either protected or lost.

We live in an environment that begs for our attention. Many of us want to be everywhere, to say something on every subject, and to stay relevant to every discussion, suggestion, and idea. Wisdom asks three questions of us. Do I need to be there? Do I need to say something? Do I need to give my attention to this? Where the honest answer is no, we walk away, and the ability to walk away is a form of maturity.

Martha received this correction from the Lord in her own house. "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). Martha was serving, and the service was good. The correction addressed the number of things that had captured her, and it pointed her to the one thing that mattered in that hour.

The book of Proverbs gives the same instruction about the path of the feet: "Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left" (Proverbs 4:25-27). Turning to the right or left describes the periphery, where the things that are neither evil nor central compete for our steps. Solomon also warns about quarrels that belong to other people: "He who passes by and meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a dog by the ears" (Proverbs 26:17).

Social media illustrates the problem. It presents a steady supply of matters that call for our opinion, and we were created with the capacity to hold opinions. Walking away from these invitations is difficult, particularly when we have something to say. Some of these invitations are traps, and their function is to pull us away from who we are and what we represent. The question to ask is whether this matter belongs to our assignment.

Many people today are committed to good things and have left the important things. They pour themselves into activities that carry real value in the eyes of others while the assignment that matches their design goes unattended. A good thing and an important thing can occupy the same calendar, and only clarity about our calling tells us which one deserves the hour.

Vision Selects the Battles

A common counsel says we should select our battles. The counsel is sound, and it leaves open the question of how the selection is made. Vision makes the selection. When we carry a clear picture of our identity, our purpose, and our value, the issues that fall outside that picture lose their claim on us. When that clarity is absent, we want to be relevant in everything, and no one can be relevant in everything.

The Lord commands us to give the vision a permanent place: "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it" (Habakkuk 2:2). A vision written down becomes a standard against which invitations can be measured. Solomon adds, "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint" (Proverbs 29:18). The absence of vision removes the restraint that keeps our movement in order.

Nehemiah shows what this looks like in a leader's life. While he was rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, Sanballat and Geshem sent a message asking him to meet them on the plain of Ono. Nehemiah recognized that they intended to harm him, and he answered, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?" (Nehemiah 6:3). The invitation arrived four times, and he gave the same answer each time (Nehemiah 6:4). A man whose vision was clear needed no fresh deliberation for each request.

Our movement in life should be measured by how we set priority in the fulfillment of our calling. Vision defines the movement, and the movement is then tested by whether our hours went to the work we were assigned.

Building the Capacity to Fulfill Purpose

Priority begins with the development of ourselves. We cannot claim to move toward a divine purpose while lacking the skill, the ability, the competence, the knowledge, and the experience that the purpose requires. God assigns a task and expects us to be prepared for it. Whatever the calling is, whether as a man or as a woman, we are responsible to learn what it demands.

Scripture shows preparation as a season with its own value. Luke records of Jesus, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). Thirty years of preparation preceded three years of public ministry. Moses was "learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22) before he spent forty years in the wilderness. David's skill with the harp brought him to Saul's court (1 Samuel 16:18), and his years with the sheep gave him the record he cited before Goliath (1 Samuel 17:34-37). Joseph's years of administration in Potiphar's house and in the prison prepared him for Egypt.

Solomon states the outcome: "Do you see a man who excels in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before unknown men" (Proverbs 22:29). Excellence follows preparation, and preparation requires time set apart for it. Paul credits grace as well: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Corinthians 15:10). Grace and labor work together, and neither replaces the other.

The first priorities of a life lived toward purpose are therefore learning, developing ourselves, equipping ourselves, and acquiring the skills and relationships that the assignment will demand. A person who postpones these until the assignment arrives will discover that the assignment requires what only earlier years could have supplied.

The People We Walk With

Relationships are an investment of time, and they deserve the same ordering as every other use of it. Three kinds of relationship belong in a life that moves toward purpose. The first is made up of the people we impact, those we mentor and disciple. The second is made up of our peers, people who understand what we are saying and with whom we can think aloud. The third is made up of mentors and fathers, people we honor because they have the experience and maturity that comes from having walked the path.

Paul's instruction to Timothy contains all three: "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul stands as the father, Timothy is the one connected to him, and the faithful men are those Timothy will teach. Timothy stood in the middle of a chain and received from above while giving below.

Peers provide a different service. Some conversations only make sense to those who stand at the same level of interaction. When we bring a decision to such a person, they help us think, process our thoughts, and find motivation. Solomon writes, "As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

Fathers give what only experience can give. Paul reminds the Corinthians, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers" (1 Corinthians 4:15). Instructors transfer information, and a father transfers the way through a season he has already crossed. A story is told of a man who fell into a pit and called for help. Passersby gave reasons why they could not pull him out, and each one promised to help after he got out. When he had grown tired and almost given up, he found the courage to call again, and another man jumped into the pit. The man in the pit asked why he had joined him when he needed to be pulled out. The rescuer answered that he had been in that pit before and knew the way out, and that the man only needed to follow him.

We need people like that in the pits that threaten to finish us. In a valley, in a difficult place, one or two people who stand with us are worth more than many who observe from the edge. Solomon writes, "Woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up" (Ecclesiastes 4:10), and "A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Proverbs 17:17). Where we find such people, we recognize them, honor them, and remain close to them.

Some relationships add nothing to our journey, and in the hour of need they produce only excuses. We can walk away from those without hostility. The Lord calls us to serve and help many people, and service to those around us continues. The distinction lies between those we serve and those we walk with.

Solomon writes, "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed" (Proverbs 13:20). The people with whom we spend our time shape the person who arrives at the destination.

Destination Defines Distraction

We can only call something a distraction by weighing it against what we have been assigned, what we are called to do, and where we are going. Suppose you are travelling to the Northern Cape and a friend offers you a free ride to the Eastern Cape. The offer costs you nothing, and you decline it, because the ride carries you away from your destination. There are people, activities, and habits in our lives today that operate in the same way, and they have taken our hours for years.

Our travel through life includes many shared vehicles. Consider a minibus taxi carrying ten or twenty people for a journey of thirty or forty minutes. The passengers meet, sometimes they talk, and sometimes someone says something negative. A traveller with a destination looks away, because the only link between him and that person is the vehicle. At the stop, each passenger goes his own way and the two will not see each other again.

Many situations in life work like the taxi, the bus, the train, or the flight. The workplace is one of them. People in a workplace say and do things that irritate us, and some of them will resign or be transferred, and eventually we ourselves will move on. Carrying the same workplace issues home with us is immaturity, and it prevents growth because it gives a temporary situation a permanent place in our life. Solomon writes, "The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, and his glory is to overlook a transgression" (Proverbs 19:11).

Jesus behaved this way. When a Samaritan village refused Him because His face was set toward Jerusalem, James and John wanted to call down fire. Luke records that Jesus rebuked them, and that "they went to another village" (Luke 9:51-56). He carried no offense forward and continued toward Jerusalem.

The writer of Hebrews gives a related instruction: "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1-2). A race is run on a course, and the runner attends to the finish line. Paul described his own running the same way: "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty" (1 Corinthians 9:26).

Jesus, the Master of Time

Jesus lived on the earth for thirty-three years, and He completed all that the Father sent Him to do. In prayer He reported, "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4). The scale of the pressures on those years deserves attention.

The Pharisees opposed Him at every step. The Roman Empire ruled over the land. The poor pressed around Him, His disciples needed constant teaching, and the devil challenged Him in person. Despite these demands, He found time to pray, to speak with the Father, and to hear from the Father.

His management of time began with a clear purpose. At twelve years old He answered His mother, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Later He said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34). Every hour was interpreted through the assignment, and the assignment was received from the Father: "the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do" (John 5:19).

The Gospels show Him refusing the demands of a crowd. Mark records that He rose long before daylight, went to a solitary place, and prayed. When His disciples found Him they said, "Everyone is looking for You." He answered, "Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth" (Mark 1:35-38). A city was waiting for Him and He left it, because the purpose for which He came pointed elsewhere. Luke tells us that "He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed" (Luke 5:16), so prayer was a repeated part of His schedule.

The Father's timing governed His own. To His mother at the wedding in Cana He said, "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). To His brothers He said, "My time has not yet come" (John 7:6). When He received word that Lazarus was sick, "He stayed two more days in the place where He was" (John 11:6). Urgent appeals from those who loved Him did not set His schedule. Yet He also carried urgency: "I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4). Patience toward pressure and urgency toward assignment coexisted in Him.

He met the devil's offers with the same clarity. In the wilderness the enemy offered Him the kingdoms of the world without the cross (Matthew 4:8-10), and He answered from Scripture. The shortcut would have cost Him the assignment, and He recognized it as a distraction. When the time came, Luke records that "He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). The phrase describes a man whose direction was settled.

Jesus came to show us the way to heaven, and He also came to show us how to bring heaven into our lives and our space. He taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Life can draw a person into quagmires and quicksand, into a place where he cannot find his way out.

David describes the experience, "I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing" (Psalm 69:2), and the deliverance he found: "He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps" (Psalm 40:2). Jesus lived above the mire and shows us how to live there.

Managing Time in the Last Days

The Scriptures place the last days inside the present age. Peter quoted Joel on the day of Pentecost and declared that the promise of the outpouring of the Spirit marked the last days (Acts 2:16-17), and the writer of Hebrews states that God has spoken to us "in these last days by His Son" (Hebrews 1:2). We are living in the period the Bible describes. The events that Scripture says will characterize these days are already taking shape around us, and we can see them daily.

Peter writes to believers in this period, "But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers" (1 Peter 4:7). Paul warns Timothy, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come" (2 Timothy 3:1). Times of this kind require men and women who can manage their hours and resources, who give more attention to the things of the Spirit, and who prepare, build, and equip themselves. They keep their attention on things above while they express themselves and God's purpose on the earth. Paul instructs, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

The difference between the temporary and the eternal governs every allocation of time. Paul writes, "while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Jesus addressed the crowds who followed Him for bread with the same distinction: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life" (John 6:27). Their pursuit was temporary while He held out the eternal, and the same offer stands before us.

Paul also teaches that every work will be tested. Some builders use gold, silver, and precious stones, and others use wood, hay, and straw (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). The fire reveals which was built to last. Time given to the temporary becomes wood, hay, and straw, and time given to purpose becomes gold. Jesus also warned that the cares of this life can dull the heart and catch a person unprepared, and He told His disciples to "watch therefore, and pray always" (Luke 21:34-36).

Weariness as the Strategy of the Enemy

The spirit of the age works to overwhelm believers. Its plan is to leave us tired, weak, and burned out, unable to pray and unable to do the things that matter. Daniel saw this in his vision of the final adversary, who "shall speak pompous words against the Most High, shall persecute the saints of the Most High" and "wear out the saints of the most High" (Daniel 7:25, KJV). Wearing out is a method, and its aim is to reduce our capacity for what God has assigned.

Scripture offers a response to the strategy. Isaiah writes, "But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Paul writes, "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart" (Galatians 6:9). The writer of Hebrews tells us to consider Christ, "lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls" (Hebrews 12:3). Luke records that Jesus taught His disciples "that men always ought to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

The Lord also provides rest as part of the order of priority. He says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28), and He invites the disciples, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while" (Mark 6:31). A yoke is an assignment, and Jesus says His yoke is easy and His burden light (Matthew 11:30). The assignment He gives is fitted to us. When our days are ordered around it, we carry what He gave us and leave what He did not.

Faithfulness Until He Comes

No one knows when the owner of life will come. Jesus said, "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (Matthew 24:42). We should live each day as though it were the last day on earth, and we should build as though Jesus were coming in a hundred years. Living ready governs our conduct, and building for the long term governs our work. A servant who holds both is the one to whom the master says, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matthew 25:21).

David is described in these terms: "For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep" (Acts 13:36). Serving a generation by the will of God requires attention to the will of God and to the generation. We are called to be a blessing to our generation, and to keep building the thing we were called to build.

Noah stands as the plain example. Hebrews says that "by faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household" (Hebrews 11:7), and Peter calls him "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). Genesis records that "Noah did according to all that God commanded him" (Genesis 6:22). Consider what would have happened if he had allowed himself to be distracted by the people who mocked him. The mockery came from those who did not understand the coming flood, and if Noah had answered it, the project would have stopped.

Sometimes we build something that looks irrelevant, and it does not fit the current narrative. People connect to what everyone likes, and a work that does not match the taste of the moment is judged irrelevant. The voice of God, the direction of God, and the intention of God define relevance. Habakkuk received this word: "For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come" (Habakkuk 2:3). Joseph built storehouses during the seven years of plenty, and Egypt did not need them until the famine arrived (Genesis 41:48-49). The work looked unnecessary in the years of abundance and saved a nation in the years of scarcity.

If we build only what everyone else is building, we will be irrelevant, because others can build better, speak better, and create better than we can. Our strength lies in what God has designed for our life. When we focus there, Christ is glorified and we are fulfilled. Paul stated the goal for his own life: "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).