

# Did God limit man's life to 120 years?

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### Creation

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## **I saw an article that said that the oldest living man is 123 years old. How can this be since God said that man will not live longer than 120 years?**

A. The view that God has limited the life of a human to only 120 years is a misconception stemming from a wrong interpretation of Genesis 6:3:

***Gen. 6:3 Then the LORD said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years."***

Notice this verse does **not** explicitly teach that mankind's lifespan was limited to 120 years. The text only says that "man's days shall be one hundred and twenty years." That phrase is open to interpretation, and although it is common to find teachers claiming this passage limits man's lifespan, we should note that there is room for another interpretation.

In interpreting the Bible, we must allow the context to drive our conclusions, and when we consult the context of Genesis 6, we arrive at a very different (and much simpler) interpretation of this verse.

First, notice the context of Genesis 6 is **not** focused on the question of man's longevity. In fact, the topic of human lifespan is nowhere to be found in the story of the flood. So why would such a topic suddenly become part of the narrative in v.3 but then disappear altogether afterward? This doesn't make sense, so there is no reason to inject that topic into our interpretation. Inserting the issue of lifespan into the narrative of Genesis 6 is an example of [eisegesis](#), which is an invalid, subjective method of interpretation.

When we consider the true context of Genesis 6, what do we find? We see that at the start of the chapter the Lord explains the need for the

Flood, arising out of world events. Demonic interactions with women were polluting the human seed, which threatened the seed promise of the Messiah. So in v.3 we find the Lord declaring that these dire circumstances have forced His hand to cleanse the world of this sin. [For an in-depth discussion of the seed promise, please listen to our [Genesis Bible study](#).]

Then in v.3 the Lord declares that His Spirit will not strive with men forever, which means He will not exhibit patience forever but eventually He will act to correct this problem. At the end of v.3, the Lord declares man's days are numbered, and He will bring an end in 120 years. This is not a discussion of lifespan but of timing for judgment. Even today, we use a similar phrase to indicate someone will eventually receive judgment (i.e., we say "his days are numbered."). Later, we learn that God brings His judgment by way of a worldwide flood. Consequently, the 120 years measures the time of God's patience before He brought the flood, not the limit on man's lifespan.

So based on the context, we interpret 120 years to be the number of years until the Lord brought the flood upon the earth. God said He would only tolerate such extreme sin on the earth for another 120 years, at which point He would wipe out the earth with a flood. This is how we know that the flood came exactly 120 years later.

There is a second reason we must reject the conventional interpretation that man's lifespan was limited to 120 years. Such an interpretation contradicts other scripture. Reading through the rest of Genesis, we find many people who lived much longer than 120 years even **after** the Lord God made His declaration in chapter 6.

For example, Noah lived to 600 years even **after** God's declaration, and his sons also lived hundreds of years **after** this declaration. Generations later we still find Abraham, Isaac and Jacob living well past the age of 120 years. Even today people are reported to live longer than 120 years old on rare occasions. These facts lead us to wonder what value was God's pronouncement if it placed a limit of 120 years on man's life? What did this so-called limit achieve given how often it has proven ineffective? Is this how God's word works?

Clearly, God's word is the final authority in the Universe and nothing in Creation can frustrate the plans of God. In fact, the Bible states

plainly that God's word will always come to pass once it has been declared by Him:

***Is. 55:11    So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;  
                  It will not return to Me empty,                    Without  
accomplishing what I desire,                    And without succeeding in  
the matter for which I sent it.***

Therefore, interpreting Genesis 6:3 to mean mankind will not live past 120 years contradicts other scripture and erodes confidence in the power of God's word. Any interpretation of scripture that diminishes confidence in God's word cannot be correct. We must choose the interpretation that fits the context *and* harmonizes with the rest of scripture, which is that God set a time limit of 120 years before He would bring the flood on earth

By the way, this example illustrates how the improper interpretation of scripture can gain widespread acceptance through repetition from the pulpit even though that interpretation plainly contradicts other scripture. Such poor biblical scholarship is dangerous, because it erodes believers' confidence in the authority of scripture, especially when these manmade contradictions are brought to their attention (i.e., as when a person see a news report of someone living past 120 years and begins to question the trustworthiness of the Bible).