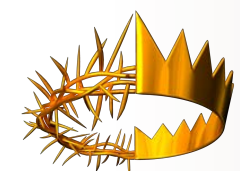




The Tyranny of the Urgent: Principles of Focus

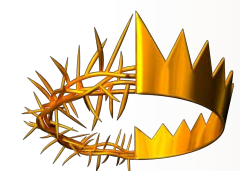
MODULE 2



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- **Distinguish between urgent tasks and important tasks.**
- **Identify common “time thieves” and distractions.**
- **Understand the spiritual danger of busyness.**

When Everything Feels Urgent



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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WHEN EVERYTHING FEELS URGENT

The week begins with intention.

You wake up early enough to pray. You intend to read something meaningful. You plan to focus on the tasks that truly matter. There is even space in your calendar that looks almost peaceful.

But before the day has properly started, something shifts.



When Everything Feels Urgent



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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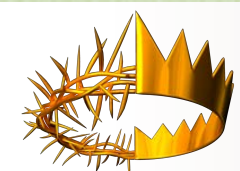
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A message arrives that cannot wait. A meeting is moved forward. A child needs immediate attention. A task you thought would take you 30 minutes to complete has already taken three hours. A church responsibility resurfaces. A decision must be made. An email demands a response. A notification flashes. A call comes in.

By mid-morning, your day is no longer unfolding – it is reacting and you're tired. Your plan for the day becomes redundant and the peace you had when you thought you were in control is a thing of the past.



When Everything Feels Urgent

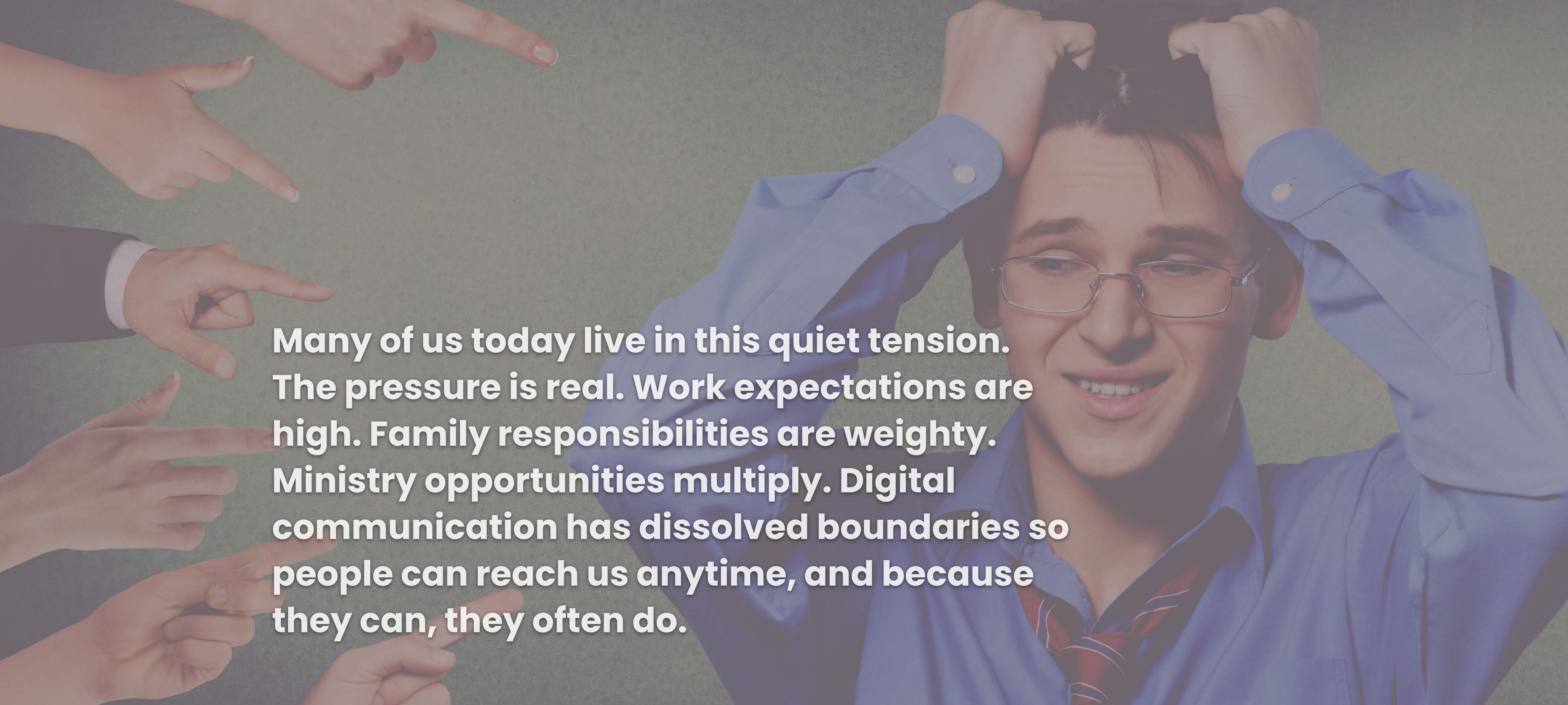


REDEEM THE TIME 30

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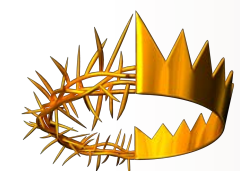


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Many of us today live in this quiet tension. The pressure is real. Work expectations are high. Family responsibilities are weighty. Ministry opportunities multiply. Digital communication has dissolved boundaries so people can reach us anytime, and because they can, they often do.

When Everything Feels Urgent



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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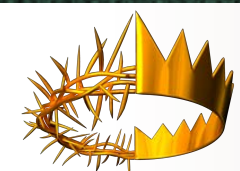


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The pressure goes deeper than personal habit. Research shows that busyness has become a status symbol. A series of studies led by Columbia professor Silvia Bellezza found that people perceive those who are busy and who use products signalling busyness as more important, more competent, and more impressive than those with abundant leisure time.^[1] As the sociologist Jonathan Gershuny observes, "**Work, not leisure, is now the signifier of dominant social status.**"^[2]



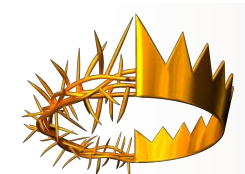
When Everything Feels Urgent



This tension is not new. More than a century ago, Ellen White observed the same pattern forming within the church itself: "As our numbers are increasing, broader plans must be laid to meet the increasing demands of the times; but we see no special increase of fervent piety, of Christian simplicity, and earnest devotion. The church seems content to take only the first steps in conversion. They are more ready for active labor than for humble devotion, more ready to engage in outward religious service than in the inner work of the heart. Meditation and prayer are neglected for bustle and show."^[1]

[1] Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 535

When Everything Feels Urgent



REDEEM THE TIME 30

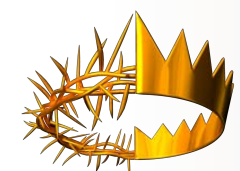
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Tyranny does not always look like oppression. Sometimes it looks like overcommitment. Other times it looks like good intentions. It may even look like faithfulness. **But tyranny exists wherever something governs us without our conscious consent.**

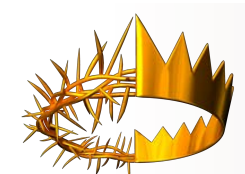
When Everything Feels Urgent



Urgency, left unexamined, can become such a governor and it ends up determining:

- what receives our attention,
- what is postponed,
- what is protected,
- and what is quietly neglected.

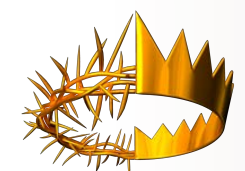
When Everything Feels Urgent

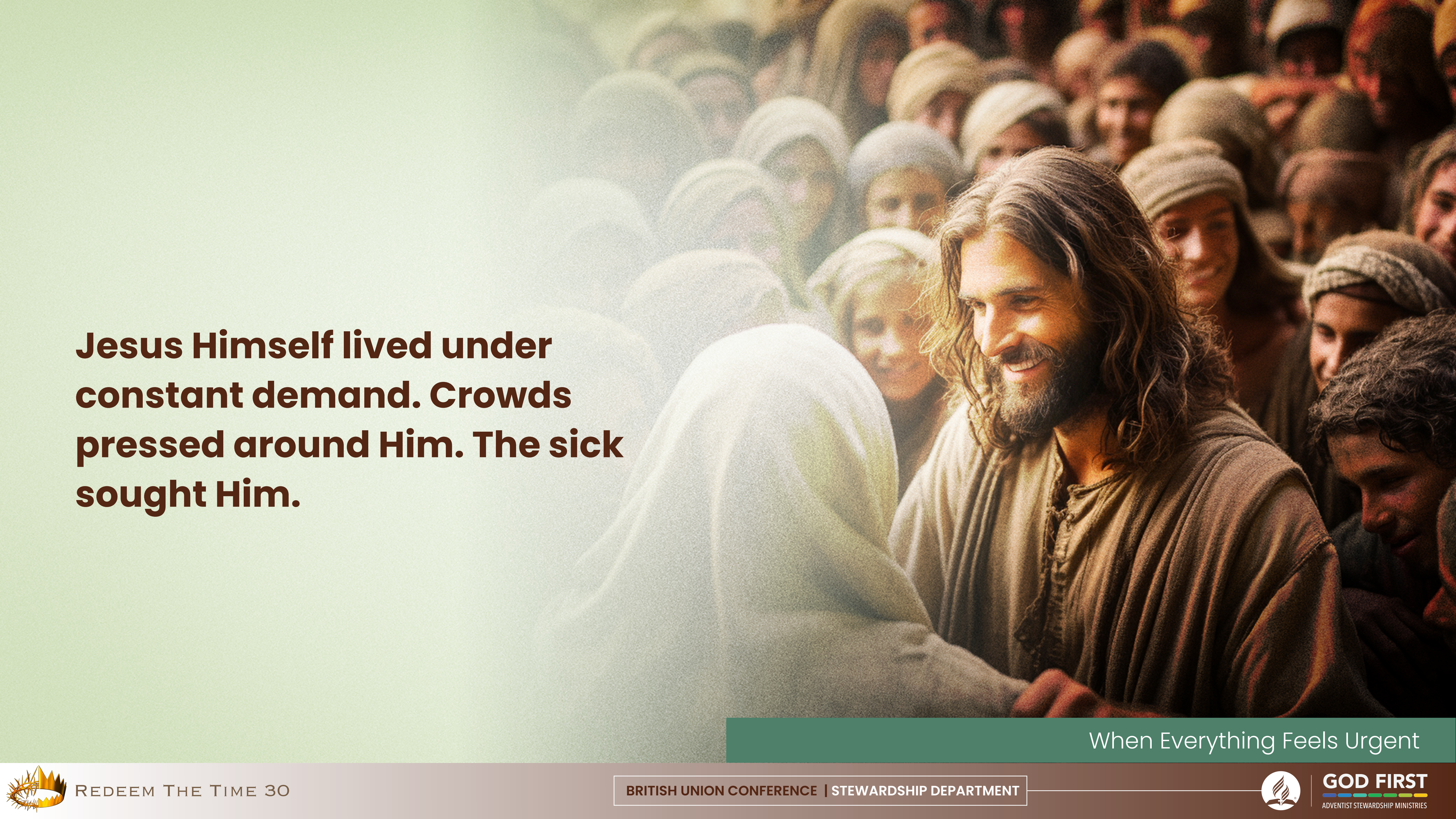


The apostle Paul writes, ***“See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil”.***

(Ephesians 5:15–16 NKJV)

When Everything Feels Urgent





Jesus Himself lived under constant demand. Crowds pressed around Him. The sick sought Him.

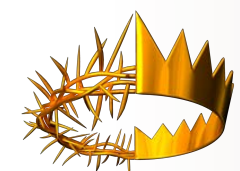
When Everything Feels Urgent



Then, just as it is today, the contrast with the religious culture of His day could not have been sharper. Ellen White noted that "in the estimation of the rabbis it was the sum of religion to be always in a bustle of activity. They depended upon some outward performance to show their superior piety. Thus they separated their souls from God, and built themselves up in self-sufficiency." [AM1] [1] Jesus refused that pattern. His pace was governed not by the expectations around Him but by communion with His Father.

[1] Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 362

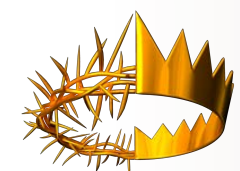
When Everything Feels Urgent



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When Everything Feels Urgent



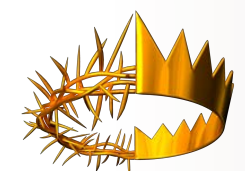
There is a profound difference between being busy and being governed by busyness. Busyness is a description of your circumstances – a full schedule, many responsibilities, real demands on your time. Being governed by busyness is something else entirely. It means that urgency has become the operating system of your life. You are no longer choosing what receives your attention, urgency is choosing for you. You are no longer deciding what matters, the loudest signal is deciding.

BEING BUSY

VS

**GOVERNED
BY BUSYNESS**

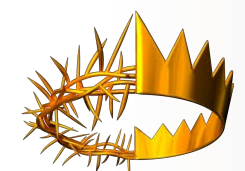
When Everything Feels Urgent



This session is meant to challenge you to ask yourself:

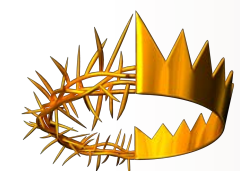
- Where has urgency become automatic?
- Where has reaction replaced reflection?
- Where has constant activity crowded out quiet attentiveness?
- And perhaps the deeper question: Who or what is shaping how I see my time?

When Everything Feels Urgent



Before we move on, take a moment to sit with three questions

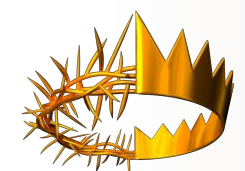
When Everything Feels Urgent



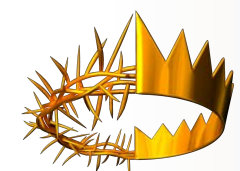
Pause & Reflect

1. What in your life currently feels most urgent?
2. What important things keep getting postponed and what keeps displacing them?
3. When was the last time you felt fully present rather than hurried?

When Everything Feels Urgent



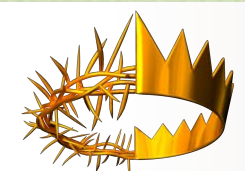
EXTERNAL PRESSURES AND THE CULTURE OF URGENCY



For the generations before us, distance created delay and news travelled slowly. In the 19th-century United States the Pony Express was celebrated for cutting the journey from the East Coast to the West Coast down to just ten days - and that was considered a breakthrough. Today most of us carry a device that connects us instantly to the rest of the world at any hour. Fear of missing out keeps us checking, scrolling, and sleeping less than we should.



External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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Many observers describe our era as an "attention economy", a term used by economists to describe a world in which, as Thomas Davenport and John Beck have argued, "attention is the rare resource that truly powers a company"^[6].

In simple terms, this means that countless systems and platforms are structured around capturing and holding human attention.

Notifications are designed to prompt response. Content is structured to provoke engagement. Messages are engineered to generate immediacy. Your attention is valuable. And because it is valuable, it is competed for. All this does not mean technology is evil. It means the environment we inhabit is not neutral.

[6] Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2001)



External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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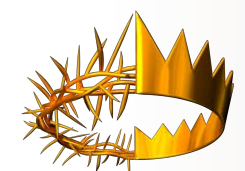


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Yet the environment we navigate daily works against exactly that kind of resilience. Beyond technology, the same acceleration shapes the workplace and the church alike. Email replaced letters, then instant messaging replaced email. Meetings multiplied. Timelines compressed. In ministry, the pattern mirrors the office and opportunities to serve are abundant, needs are visible, requests are frequent, and in a world of real suffering it can feel irresponsible not to respond quickly.

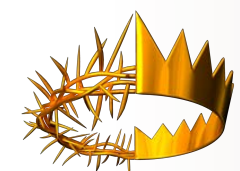


External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



How can it surprise anyone then that families report spending less time together?

External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



Under such competing narratives, urgency becomes normalised. And once it is normalised, it begins to shape our decisions in ways we may not even notice. A study published in the Journal of Consumer Research by researchers at Johns Hopkins, the University of Florida, and the University of Chicago found that when people were presented with two tasks - one offering a clearly better outcome but with a longer window, and another offering less but feeling more immediate - they consistently chose the worse option. Not because it was harder or more valuable, but simply because it felt urgent. The researchers called this 'the mere urgency effect.' The illusion of a ticking clock was enough to override rational judgement. And the busier people perceived themselves to be, the more susceptible they were.^[9]

[9] Zhu, Meng, and Christopher K. Hsee. "The Mere Urgency Effect." *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 3 (2018): 673–690.

External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency

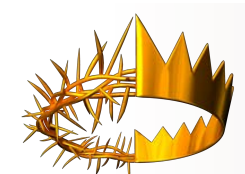


You are not weak because you feel pressure.

You are not spiritually inferior because you struggle with constant demands.

You are living in a culture that intensifies urgency at multiple levels.

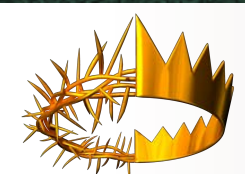
External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



Pause & Reflect

Think of a recent moment when you chose the urgent over the important. What did the urgent task offer you that made it feel more compelling?

External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



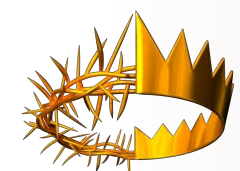
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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL PULL OF URGENCY



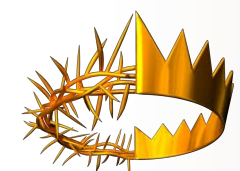
Pause & Reflect

Think of something genuinely important that you have been postponing. What would it take for that thing to feel as compelling as the tasks that keep displacing it?

The Pull of Completion

That resonance is powerful. Earlier, we noted research on what has been called "the mere urgency effect" – the tendency to prioritise tasks that feel urgent, even when they are objectively less important. The external signal of "now" exerts influence. But why does it influence us so strongly? Because urgency gives something back to us.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



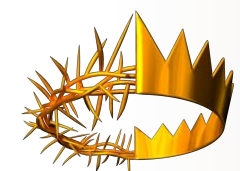
Pause & Reflect

Think of something genuinely important that you have been postponing. What would it take for that thing to feel as compelling as the tasks that keep displacing it?

When an urgent task is completed, something in us relaxes. The email is answered. The problem is solved. The item is crossed off the list. There is a small but genuine satisfaction in that moment – a sense of closure that the important things in life rarely offer. Our minds are drawn toward closure.[1]

[1] Zhu, Meng, and Christopher K. Hsee. "The Mere Urgency Effect." *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 3 (2018): 673–690.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency

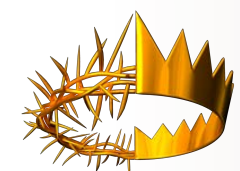


Pause & Reflect

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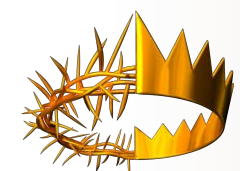
Long-term planning delivers no instant reward. Saving toward a goal can feel endless. Sabbath preparation produces no visible applause. Deep relationships cannot be resolved in an afternoon. And spiritual growth has no progress bar, no completion notification, no moment where you can step back and say: finished. Urgency offers something that importance almost never can: a definite, visible, immediate sense of done. And because our minds are drawn toward that feeling, urgency wins the competition for our attention again and again, not through force, but through appeal.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



The Shield of Busyness

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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Pause & Reflect

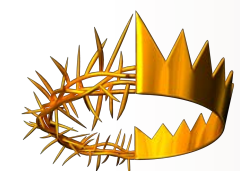
When a quiet moment appears unexpectedly in your day, what is your first instinct and what might that instinct be protecting you from?

The Shield of Busyness

Urgency can also protect us from something we would rather not face. Silence can be uncomfortable. Reflection can expose misalignment. Slowing down can surface questions about identity, calling, or direction that feel unsettling.

Constant activity keeps those questions at bay.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



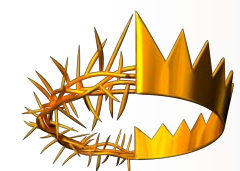
Pause & Reflect

When a quiet moment appears unexpectedly in your day, what is your first instinct and what might that instinct be protecting you from?

If I am always responding, I do not have to examine. If I am always needed, I do not have to evaluate. If I am always moving, I do not have to sit still with uncertainty.

In this way, busyness can become a shield. Not intentionally, but functionally. Consider how quickly we reach for distraction when a quiet moment appears. A phone in hand. A message checked. A task added. We may tell ourselves that we are being responsible. And often we are. But sometimes we are also avoiding vulnerability before God.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



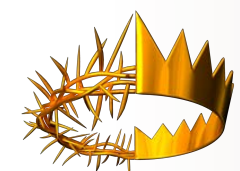
Pause & Reflect

When a quiet moment appears unexpectedly in your day, what is your first instinct and what might that instinct be protecting you from?

This is why the apostle Paul speaks of the renewing of the mind in Romans 12:2: *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”* (NKJV).

Renewal requires space. Discernment requires attentiveness. Conformity to prevailing patterns happens almost automatically; transformation does not. If the dominant pattern of our environment is urgency, and if urgency resonates with our internal desire for productivity, validation, and closure, then conformity is easy. Discernment requires interruption.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



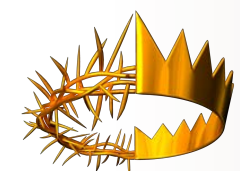
Pause & Reflect

When a quiet moment appears unexpectedly in your day, what is your first instinct and what might that instinct be protecting you from?

And so, the deeper questions deserve honest attention: Why does a delayed response make me anxious? Why does a quiet afternoon feel uncomfortable? Why do I turn to a screen to fill my time? Why does being needed feel reassuring?

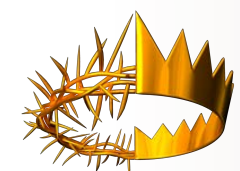
These questions are invitations to honesty. Because urgency is not only about time. It is about approval. It is about belonging. It is about identity. And because those are deeply human needs, urgency's pull can be strong. It is those needs we must examine next.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



The Fear of Disappointing

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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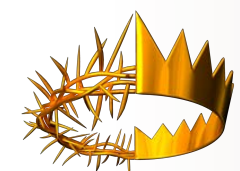


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Practise: The No Script

This exercise can be done privately, in pairs, or in a small group. Many of us avoid saying no not because we lack the conviction but because we lack the words. In the moment, when a request arrives and we feel the familiar pull of obligation or approval, we either say yes automatically or hesitate long enough that the moment passes – and we have agreed by default. The following exercise is designed to give you language: a small repertoire of honest, warm, and firm responses. Because a no that is never said is still a yes. And that yes has a cost.

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



Step 1: Read through the phrases below. Notice which feel natural and which feel uncomfortable. The discomfort itself is informative.

To decline directly:

- "I'm not able to take that on right now but thank you for thinking of me."
- "I need to say no to this one – my capacity is genuinely full at the moment."
- "That's not something I can commit to well right now."

To decline while honouring the person:

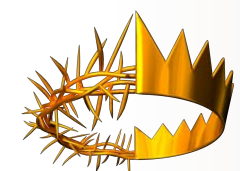
- "I can see this matters, and I want to be honest with you – I can't give it the attention it deserves."
- "I'd rather say no clearly now than say yes and let you down."

To decline with redirection:

- "I can't take this on, but [name] might be well placed to help."
- "I'm not the right person for this one – have you considered asking...?"

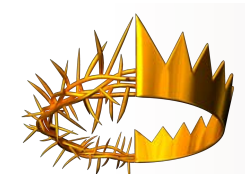
To buy time before deciding:

- "Let me come back to you by [date] – I want to give you a proper answer rather than a quick one."
- "I need to check what I'm already carrying before I commit to anything new."



Step 2: Think of one request that is currently on your horizon – something you are already feeling pressure to accept but are not certain you should. Write it down.

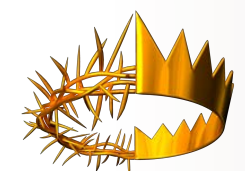
Step 3: Choose one phrase from above, or write your own, that would let you respond to that request honestly and kindly. If you are doing this in a group, practise saying it aloud to a partner.



Pause & Reflect

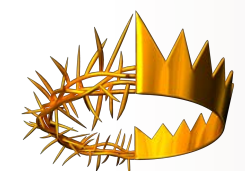
1. What emotion surfaces when you rehearse declining? Relief? Guilt? Anxiety?
2. Who are you most afraid of disappointing – and what does that reveal about where your sense of approval is rooted?
3. What would you be protecting if you said no to this particular request?
4. The goal is not to become unavailable or indifferent. It is to learn to say yes and no from a place of discernment rather than anxiety. Because a no that protects something important is not a failure of love. It is an act of it.

External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency



The Adrenaline Trap

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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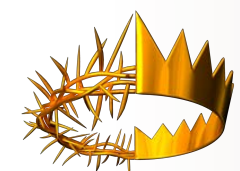


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Pause & Reflect

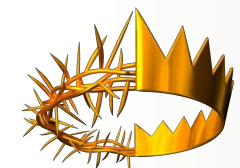
Is it the pressure that moves you or the fear of what you might discover if the pressure were gone?

The Psychological Pull of Urgency





The Psychological Pull of Urgency



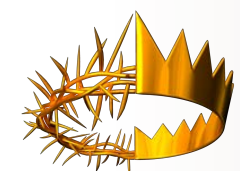
REDEEM THE TIME 30

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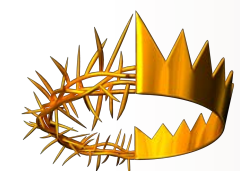
THE SPIRITUAL COST OF REACTIVE LIVING



Ellen White writes ***“Godliness is in danger of being crowded out of the soul through overdevotion to business”***.^[12]

[12] Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 5, p. 560

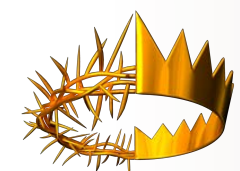
The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living



"Be still, and know that I am God".

(Psalm 46:10 NKJV)

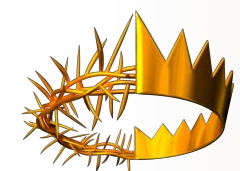
The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living



"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

(Isaiah 30:15, NKJV)

The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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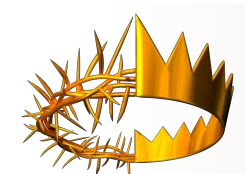


GOD FIRST
ADVENTIST STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES

"A worker cannot gain success while he hurries through his prayers and rushes away to look after something that he fears may be neglected or forgotten. He gives only a few hurried thoughts to God; he does not take time to think, to pray, to wait upon the Lord for a renewal of physical and spiritual strength. He soon becomes weary."^[13]

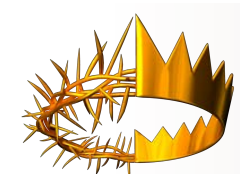
[13] Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 7, p. 243

The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living



Jesus modelled a different way with striking consistency. Mark tells us that after a day of intense public ministry – healing, teaching, casting out demons – Jesus rose before dawn and withdrew to a solitary place to pray (Mark 1:35). When the disciples found Him and told Him that everyone was looking for Him, He did not rush back. He said, ***"Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth"*** (Mark 1:38, NKJV). He acknowledged the demand. He did not deny it. But He refused to let it dictate His direction. His clarity came from withdrawal, not from reaction. He was never idle. But He was never enslaved by urgency.

The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living

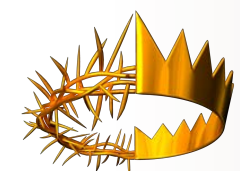


"And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there... therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

(Deuteronomy 5:15, NKJV)



The Spiritual Cost of Reactive Living



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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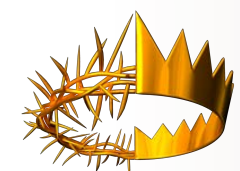


GOD FIRST
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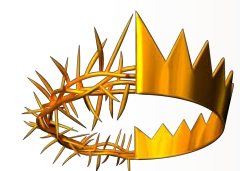
Pause & Reflect

When was the last time you felt deeply unhurried in God's presence?

The Psychological Pull of Urgency



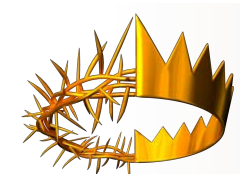
URGENT VS IMPORTANT – A TOOL FOR DISCERNMENT



Discernment begins with a simple but often overlooked distinction. Urgent things feel immediate and they press in, demand response, arrive with a deadline or a notification or a person waiting for an answer. Important things operate differently. They shape life at a deeper level. They align with purpose, build foundations, strengthen relationships, protect health, nurture the inner life, and honour God. Some things are both – a genuine emergency, a sick child, a pastoral crisis that cannot wait. Those require immediate action and discernment does not dispute that. The challenge is different: the tyranny of the urgent takes hold when urgent things consistently crowd out important ones, especially the important things that carry no deadline and produce no visible applause.

The apostle Paul prayed that the Philippian believers' love would abound "*in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent*" (Philippians 1:9–10, NKJV). Not merely the things that are good – the things that are excellent. Discernment, in Paul's understanding, is the ability to distinguish between what is acceptable and what is best. That is precisely the skill reactive living erodes and precisely the skill we need to recover.

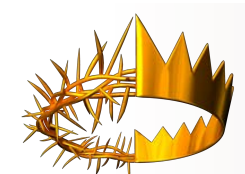
Urgent vs Important – A Tool for Discernment



	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Genuine crises and pressing responsibilities	Foundations for spiritual depth and lasting fruit
Not Important	Interruptions dressed as responsibilities	Habits that fill time but leave little fruit

Figure 1: A Framework for Discernment - Urgent vs. Important

Urgent vs Important – A Tool for Discernment



Practise: A Simple Discernment Audit

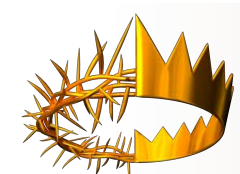
This exercise can be done privately or in a group setting.

Step 1: Think back over the past seven days. Write down ten things that took significant time or attention. Do not overthink this. Include work tasks, family demands, church responsibilities, digital habits, and any recurring interruptions.

Step 2: Place each item into one of the four categories above.

Step 3: Circle two items that belong in "Important but Not Urgent" that you postponed or squeezed.

Urgent vs Important – A Tool for Discernment

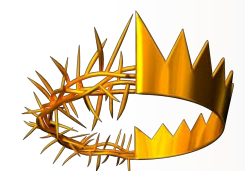


Pause & Reflect

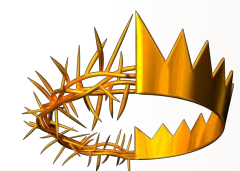
1. What kept those important things from happening?
2. What did the urgent things offer you in that moment that the important things did not?
3. If you were to protect those important things first this coming week, what would need to be delayed, reduced, or declined?

If you are doing this in a group, share one insight with a partner. Keep it simple: "I realised that..." or "I want to protect..."

Urgent vs Important – A Tool for Discernment

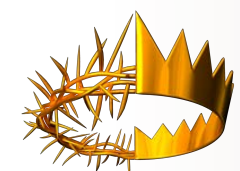


PERSONAL REFLECTION AND DISCERNMENT PRACTICES

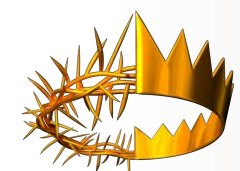


- 1. Know Your Energy, Not Just Your Time**
- 2. Protect One Important Thing**
- 3. Practise a Daily Pause**

Personal Reflection and Discernment Practices



A FINAL WORD



REDEEM THE TIME 30

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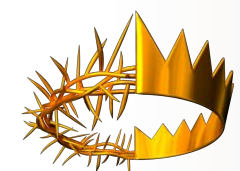


GOD FIRST
ADVENTIST STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES

You live in a world that will continue to accelerate. Notifications will not disappear. Deadlines will not diminish. Demands will not cease. But you are not powerless within that world, and you are not condemned to reactive living.

The tyranny of the urgent is powerful but it is not ultimate. Ellen White held both sides of this tension with characteristic clarity: "Life is too solemn to be absorbed in temporal and earthly matters, in a treadmill of care and anxiety for the things that are but an atom in comparison with the things of eternal interest. Yet God has called us to serve Him in the temporal affairs of life. Diligence in this work is as much a part of true religion as is devotion. The Bible gives no indorsement to idleness."^[14]

[14] Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 343



You are not simply a manager of minutes. You are a steward of something far more significant, namely the time, attention, and presence that God has entrusted to you, to be given wisely, to the people and purposes that matter most.

That is not a burden. It is a calling.

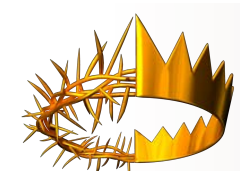
Before you leave this session, sit with one question:

What one change will you begin this week?

Name it. Write it down. And take the first small step.

[14] **Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons, p. 343**

A Final Word





Alex Mareniiuc