The Tyranny of the Urgent: Principles of Focus

MODULE 2

RTT MODULE 2 SCRIPT

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GOD FIRST
ADVENTIST STEWARDSHIP MINISTRIES

Learning Objectives:

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

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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.

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.

This describes what many of us experience often, some even every day. And I want to be clear from the outset that nothing in that type of morning is sinful, or rebellious. In fact, most of what interrupts your planned flow may even be good: helping someone, solving a problem, responding to a need, making an impact.

And yet by evening, when the noise settles and you reflect on your day, a quiet question remains: Did I spend my time well or did I simply survive the day?

The days become weeks, the weeks become months, and the months become years. Always moving. Always needed. Always responding. But when you stop long enough to look back, a quiet and uncomfortable question surfaces: did I spend those years on what actually mattered - or did I simply stay busy enough to avoid asking that question?

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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.

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Urgency has become the normal atmosphere of life and you are not alone in feeling it.

Part of what sustains it is not just the pressure from outside, but a deeper societal pressure to appear busy. We feel the quiet need to be productive, responsive, engaged, available.

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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]

To say "I'm busy" has become almost a badge of honour. It doesn't feel natural anymore to answer a call and to say "actually, nothing" to the caller's question "what are you doing?". We do not simply complete tasks – we derive value from them. When the to-do list is full, we feel important. When it is empty, we may feel uneasy.

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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."*[3]

The problem here is not responsibility. If your schedule is full because you are raising a family, leading a team, serving your church, and doing your work with integrity, that is not something to feel guilty about. A full life is not a disordered one. The issue is something more subtle than busyness itself. The issue is when our sense of worth begins to rise and fall with our schedule and when the to-do list becomes not just a practical tool but a measure of our value. When we stay in motion not only because there is genuine work to do, but because stillness has begun to feel like failure.

And gradually, without noticing, urgency begins to shape us.

This is what we mean by the tyranny of the urgent.

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1 **Silvia Bellezza, Neeru Paharia, and Anat Keinan, "Conspicuous Consumption of Time: When Busyness and Lack of Leisure Time Become a Status Symbol," Journal of Consumer Research 44, no. 1 (2017): 118–138**

2 **Jonathan Gershuny, quoted in Adam Waytz, "Beware a Culture of Busyness," Harvard Business Review, March–April 2023**

3 **Ellen G. White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, p. 535**

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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.

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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.

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Scripture does not condemn work while romanticising idleness or making passivity into a virtue. As in many other areas of life, it consistently calls God's people to live with discernment. 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). Notice the emphasis: not speed, but wisdom. Not volume of activity, but intentional living. This is further emphasised by Psalm 90:12, where we read *"So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"* (NKJV).

Wisdom assumes that not everything deserves equal urgency and it helps us to realise that even if we can do something, it doesn't mean we should do it.

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Jesus Himself lived under constant demand. Crowds pressed around Him. The sick sought Him. Leaders challenged Him. His disciples misunderstood Him. And yet repeatedly we read that He withdrew to pray. He paused. He declined certain requests. He moved according to the Father's timing rather than public pressure. That pattern deserves closer attention and we will return to it.

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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."*[4] Jesus refused that pattern. His pace was governed not by the expectations around Him but by communion with His Father.

4 Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages, p. 362

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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. The diary fills not because you have carefully weighed each commitment, but because something arrived and it felt urgent and you responded or someone asked and you found it easier to say yes than to disappoint them. And then something else arrived. And you responded again. Until responding itself has become the shape of your days.

The danger of living this way is not dramatic. You will not wake up one morning to find that everything has suddenly collapsed. The danger is far quieter than that. It is gradual misalignment with a slow drift, almost imperceptible, between the life you intend and the life you are actually living.

That drift shows up in the body first. Persistent tiredness that rest does not seem to fix. A low-level anxiety that has become so familiar you have stopped noticing it. Tension that lives in the shoulders and the jaw. Sleep that does not restore. The research is clear: chronic exposure to urgency and unrelenting pressure takes a measurable physical toll. Burnout – a state of emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion caused by prolonged stress – was officially classified by the World Health Organisation as an occupational phenomenon in 2019.[5] The body keeps the score of a life that never pauses.

It shows up in relationships too. Not in sudden ruptures, but in a gradual thinning of presence. The conversations that stay surface-level because there is never quite enough time to go deeper. The people you love who have learned not to expect your full attention. The friendships that have quietly faded because the diary was always too full to protect them.

And it shows up in the spiritual life also, which is precisely why it is the most dangerous place to find it. By the time the inner life feels dry, the drift has usually been underway for a long time. Between what you say matters most and what consistently receives your best attention and energy, a gap has opened.

That gap widens quietly because the most important dimensions of the spiritual life are rarely shouting at us. Communion with God does not flash notifications. Character formation does not send reminders. Preparation for Sabbath does not force itself onto our calendars. The relationships that need unhurried presence do not page us when we have neglected them. The things that shape eternity are often quiet. And that is precisely why they are so vulnerable. It's not because

5 World Health Organisation, International Classification of Diseases, 11th rev. (ICD-11), 2019. See also Magomedova and Fatima, "Mental Health and Well-Being in the Modern Era," Cureus 17, no. 1 (2025): e77683, which reviews the cascading physical and psychological effects of chronic stress, including burnout, sleep disruption, and emotional exhaustion.

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they are unimportant but because they will never compete with urgency on urgency's terms. If we wait for them to demand our attention, we will wait a long time. They must be intentionally protected, or they will be quietly and consistently displaced.

This session is not about condemning busyness. Many of you carry responsibilities that cannot simply be dismissed. Some of you lead teams. Some care for families. Some serve faithfully in ministry while holding demanding careers.

The goal is not guilt. The goal is discernment.

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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?

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

Pause and reflect:

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

These are not accusations. They are invitations. Because unless we first recognise the quiet rule of urgency in our lives, we cannot learn how to live differently within it.

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External Pressures and the Culture of Urgency

The urgency we feel today is not simply a personal struggle – it is the product of a world that has been accelerating.

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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.

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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.

All the constant accessibility creates constant interruption. The outcome of this avalanche of information is not that we are better-informed or more efficient people, but that our attention span is shorter, we engage less meaningfully, and we experience poor mental health. A comprehensive review published in January 2025 examined the state of mental health in the modern era and found that digital dependency, social isolation, and the relentless pressure to perform have become primary drivers of anxiety, depression, and burnout. The review highlighted a painful irony: the very tools designed to connect us are contributing to our disconnection. Excessive screen time - particularly on social media - is linked to feelings of inadequacy, disturbed sleep, and weakened real-world relationships. And when these effects go unaddressed, the researchers found they do not remain contained. Chronic mental health struggles trigger what they described as a cascade - leading to increased social withdrawal, maladaptive coping behaviours, and a measurable decline in quality of life. The study's conclusion was clear: addressing this crisis requires not quick fixes, but sustained, preventive approaches that build resilience into everyday rhythms of life.[7]

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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.

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How can it surprise anyone then that families report spending less time together? A survey conducted for the British Heart Foundation found that more than a quarter of parents said they were too busy, on an average day, to spend any time at all with their children. Nearly three in

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

7 **Magomedova A, Fatima G. Mental Health and Well-Being in the Modern Era: A Comprehensive Review of Challenges and Interventions. Cureus. 2025 Jan 19;17(1):e77683.**

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ten left the house without seeing their children at least once a week. Three out of five parents admitted they were spending far less time with their families than their own parents had spent with them. And perhaps the most telling finding: 42% were concerned that even when families were home together, social media was pulling their children away from any real interaction.[8]

That last detail matters most because being in the same room is not the same as being present. Physical proximity without meaningful engagement is not family time. It is a shared silence filled with noise from somewhere else.

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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]

Digital systems compete for attention. Workplaces reward speed. Ministry and community contexts prompt responsibility. Family relationships need your presence. And even the way our minds respond to pressure conspires to keep us reactive. The external forces are real, they are multiple, and they are working together.

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8 "Children going 'days without seeing parents,'" BBC News, 12 May 2017, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-39894997. The article reports findings from a survey of 2,300 UK adults (including 1,207 parents) conducted for the British Heart Foundation.

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

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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.

And yet, two people can inhabit the same environment and respond differently. One feels constantly driven by every signal of immediacy, while the other maintains clearer boundaries. One reacts instantly, while the other pauses before deciding. If the environment alone determined our lives, this difference would not exist. Yes, external forces intensify urgency, amplify it, and multiply it. But they do not eliminate choice.

Seeing clearly is the first step toward choosing differently. Once you recognise that your attention is being competed for, that cultural admiration fuels busyness, and that structures reward immediacy, you are better positioned to respond thoughtfully rather than automatically.

Scripture never assumes that surrounding culture will naturally support wisdom. Paul's exhortation to "redeem the time" comes with the recognition that "the days are evil." Wisdom requires intentionality precisely because the environment does not naturally cultivate it.

The question is not whether urgency exists. The question is whether urgency will govern us unexamined.

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Pause and 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?

Understanding the culture of urgency does not solve the problem. But it removes illusion. It allows us to say clearly: *"I see the forces at work around me. Now I must decide how I will respond within them."*

And that decision leads us inward.

Because while external pressure is powerful, urgency does not only confront us from outside. It resonates with something inside. That is where discernment becomes essential.

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The Psychological Pull of Urgency

If external pressure were the whole story, our response to urgency would be predictable. We

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would simply be victims of circumstance. But experience tells us something more complex is happening. The truth is this: urgency does not only confront us from outside. It resonates with something inside.

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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.

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.[10]

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.

Pause and 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?

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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.

If I am always responding, I do not have to examine. If I am always needed, I do not have to

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

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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.

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.

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.

Pause and reflect:

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

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The Fear of Disappointing

There is also another layer that deserves honest attention. Behind many of the patterns we have explored – the rush to respond, the overfull calendar, the inability to pause – lies something we rarely name directly.

We are afraid of what people will think if we say no.

This fear is more than social anxiety. It is a spiritual condition. Scripture names it directly: *"The fear of man brings a snare, But whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe."* (Proverbs 29:25 NKJV). A snare does not feel like a trap at first. It feels like responsibility. It feels like kindness. It feels like faithfulness. But its effect is to capture us and to bind our decisions to the expectations of others rather than the calling of God.

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Paul wrote with striking directness to the Galatians: *"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."* (Galatians 1:10, NIV). That is a sharp question. When I say yes to a request I should decline, who am I serving? When I cannot bring myself to disappoint someone, am I acting from love or from a need to be seen as available, capable, indispensable?

The distinction matters because the motivation shapes the cost. Service that flows from love is sustainable. Service that flows from the need for approval is exhausting because approval is never finally secured. There will always be another request, another expectation, another person whose opinion feels important. And so, the calendar fills not because every commitment is genuinely ours to carry, but because the alternative feels too costly. Over time, we begin making decisions about our time not on the basis of calling, but on the basis of visibility. We accept what is seen. We protect what is praised. And we quietly abandon the unhurried, important work that no one is watching like the prayer, the preparation, the presence that shapes us at the deepest level.

Learning to say no faithfully is not the opposite of love. It is an expression of it. Every yes carries a hidden no. If we say yes to every request for our time, we are quietly saying no to the people and priorities that most need our full presence. The inability to decline is not generosity. It is a kind of scattering that leaves everyone served inadequately, including those who matter most. Faithful stewardship of our time means accepting that we cannot be everything to everyone and that trying to be is not faithfulness, but a failure to discern our actual calling.

Recognising this is the first step. Acting on it requires practice.

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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.

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."

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- "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 and reflect:

- What emotion surfaces when you rehearse declining? Relief? Guilt? Anxiety?
- Who are you most afraid of disappointing – and what does that reveal about where your sense of approval is rooted?
- What would you be protecting if you said no to this particular request?

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.

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The Adrenaline Trap

There is a fourth pattern, and it is perhaps the most subtle of all because it does not feel like a problem. It feels like productivity.

Many people discover that they focus best under pressure. Deadlines sharpen attention. Last-minute effort produces adrenaline. Completing something just in time can feel energising, even satisfying. Psychologists have noted that some people are not avoiding work when they delay. Instead, they are seeking the intensity of last-minute pressure. The adrenaline sharpens focus, and the ticking clock creates a clarity that ordinary time does not.[11] For these people, urgency has become a stimulant. They do not endure pressure – they require it.

When this pattern repeats over time, urgency becomes not only something we endure but something we rely on. We delay until pressure builds. We accept commitments until the schedule tightens. We wait for urgency to force clarity. The result is that urgency begins to structure our behaviour not because we chose it, but because we stopped noticing it.

But not everyone who delays is chasing adrenaline. For some, the deeper pattern is not excitement but fear. The fear of beginning something that might fail. The fear that the finished result will not be good enough, that it will expose inadequacy, invite criticism, or fall short of an internal standard that keeps moving. This is the quieter face of procrastination, and it is no less powerful than the adrenaline-seeking kind.

Perfectionism, at its root, is not about high standards. It is about self-protection. If I never quite finish, I can never quite fail. If I wait until conditions are perfect before I begin, I preserve the possibility that I could have done it well without ever having to prove it. The task accumulates pressure not because I am chasing the thrill of last-minute effort, but because starting feels too exposed.

Both patterns – the adrenaline trap and the perfectionist delay – share the same outcome. They hand the structure of our days over to urgency. Whether we are energised by the ticking clock or paralysed by the fear of what it will reveal, the result is the same: we are no longer choosing deliberately. We are being moved by forces we have not examined.

Scripture speaks directly to this. *"For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind"* (2 Timothy 1:7, NKJV). A sound mind – one that is clear, deliberate, and free – is not the product of urgency. It is the product of trust. The adrenaline trap and the perfectionist delay are both, at their core, expressions of misplaced trust. Faithful stewardship of time requires that we name these patterns honestly, because patterns that remain unnamed cannot be changed.

11 **Mark Travers, "The 3 Kinds of Procrastinators," Psychology Today, November 9, 202**

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Pause and reflect:

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

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The goal is not to condemn responsibility, it is to recognise patterns. And the most important patterns are often the ones that feel most normal.

Jesus' interaction with Martha and Mary illustrates this with uncommon clarity. Martha was not wrong to serve. Service is good. Hospitality is virtuous. Responsibility is necessary. But Scripture tells us she was *"worried and troubled about many things"* (Luke 10:41, NKJV). The issue was not her activity. It was what had happened inside her because of it. Urgency had entered her spirit and once it enters the spirit, it does not stay on the surface. It reshapes the interior. It turns service into anxiety, presence into performance, hospitality into demand. Martha was doing the right things, but she was doing them from a restless centre. Mary, by contrast, chose what Jesus called "the one thing needed." The scene is not a condemnation of work. It is a revelation of what work without stillness eventually costs.

The danger for us is not that we will abandon service. It is that we will serve in a way that gradually erodes attentiveness to God, to the people in front of us, and to the quiet interior life that sustains everything else. The tyranny of the urgent is most powerful precisely when it feels normal. When it feels justified. When it feels necessary. When it feels rewarding.

We have now named four patterns – the pull of completion, the shield of busyness, the fear of disappointing, and the adrenaline trap. They are different in expression but united in effect: each one, left unexamined, hands the structure of our days over to urgency rather than to wisdom. And each one feels, in the moment, like a reasonable response to a real situation. That is exactly what makes them so powerful and so difficult to see.

But they can be seen. And what can be seen can be changed. That change does not happen by accident. It happens through awareness, honest self-examination, and the slow formation of new habits. What has been formed can be reformed but reform begins with recognition.

We have examined the external forces and begun to recognise the internal resonance. But there is a deeper question still: what does reactive living cost us at the level of the soul?

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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] The phrase is striking – not merely pushed aside, but crowded out. You can be fully occupied and quietly empty at the same time.

That is perhaps the most unsettling truth about reactive living. It does not announce itself as a spiritual problem. The diary is full. The responsibilities are real. The activity is visible. But something beneath the surface has been shifting and by the time it becomes noticeable, the drift has already been underway for a long time. There is a deeper theological dimension here that deserves honest attention. When urgency governs our days, we do not simply become tired or distracted. We begin, subtly and without noticing, to live as though everything depends on us. As though the world will falter if we do not respond quickly enough, stay accessible enough, produce enough. Urgency, left unexamined, trains us into a kind of practical atheism – not a denial of God in our beliefs, but a functional absence of trust in our behaviour.

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Scripture speaks directly into this. *"Be still, and know that I am God"* (Psalm 46:10 NKJV). That command is not addressed to people with empty calendars – it is spoken into the noise of nations raging and kingdoms shaking. Stillness, in Scripture, is not the absence of demand. It is a deliberate act of trust in the middle of it. And reactive living erodes exactly that capacity for trust, replacing it with the restless assumption that our uninterrupted activity is what holds things together.

Isaiah captured the cost when he wrote: *"In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength"* (Isaiah 30:15, NKJV). Notice what God pairs together – salvation with returning, strength with quietness. These are not passive words. They describe a deliberate reorientation, a turning back toward a source of life that urgency has pulled us away from. And notice what follows in the same verse: "But you would not." The people of God, then as now, preferred to keep moving. They trusted speed over stillness, strategy over surrender. The prophet's diagnosis is uncomfortably familiar.

When every signal demands immediate response, prayer becomes hurried. Reflection becomes abbreviated. Worship becomes compressed between obligations. Service becomes transactional rather than relational. We may continue doing good things – but we do them from a restless centre. The outward activity may look faithful, but the interior life is running on fumes. The tyranny of the urgent does not usually destroy faith dramatically. It erodes it quietly. It replaces abiding with acceleration. It replaces contemplation with completion. It replaces presence with productivity.

[SLIDE]

Ellen White described the cost of this pattern with uncomfortable precision: *"A worker cannot gain success while he hurries through his prayers and rushes away to look after something that*

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

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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]

[SLIDE]

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.

That pattern was not accidental. It reflected something God had embedded into the structure of life long before Jesus walked in Galilee.

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Consider how the Sabbath command is framed in Deuteronomy. *"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 logic is striking. Sabbath is tied directly to liberation. Slaves do not rest. Slaves respond to every demand without pause, without choice, without rhythm. To be governed by urgency, to live in perpetual reaction, never pausing, never declining, never releasing the pressure of unfinished work, is to live as a slave in everything but name. Sabbath declares that God's people are no longer slaves. Not to Pharaoh, and not to the tyranny of uninterrupted demand.

This is why reactive living must ultimately be addressed not merely at the level of the calendar, but at the level of the heart. We do not simply need better tools. We need renewed trust. And Sabbath is God's own answer to that need, not a technique for better time management, but a weekly declaration of freedom. In a culture where urgency constantly whispers "act now or everything will fall apart," Sabbath declares that the world is sustained by God, not by our uninterrupted activity.

We will explore the full meaning and practice of Sabbath in Session 5. For now, it is enough to recognise this: if urgency is the problem we have been diagnosing across this session, Sabbath is not an add-on to that diagnosis. It is God's direct and deliberate answer to it, written not into a self-help framework, but into the structure of time itself.

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

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Pause and reflect:

- When was the last time you felt deeply unhurried in God's presence? This question is meant to restore clarity. And clarity, to be useful, must become practical. Before we can protect what matters most, we need a way to see it clearly in the middle of ordinary demands. That is what we turn to now.

[SLIDE]

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.

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A simple framework many people find helpful for making this distinction visible is known as the Eisenhower Matrix. It is not a spiritual text. It is not a biblical command. It is simply a way of organising attention. But a tool can serve a spiritual purpose when it helps us apply wisdom.

	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

The framework divides tasks into four categories:

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1. Urgent and Important

These are genuine crises and pressing responsibilities – the pastoral emergency that arrives without warning, the family situation that cannot wait, the work deadline that carries real consequences. They require action. The danger is not that we respond to them. The danger is that we live here permanently, treating every demand as though it belongs in this category.

2. Important but Not Urgent

These are foundations. They are the things that make life fruitful rather than merely full. Personal devotion. Family time that is not squeezed between obligations. Sabbath preparation. Health. Long-term planning. Relationships that need attention before they reach crisis point. Rest that actually restores rather than merely fills a gap. These are the activities most likely to be sacrificed because they carry no deadline and yet this is where long-term stability, spiritual depth, and relational health are built.

3. Urgent but Not Important

These are interruptions dressed as responsibilities. The meeting that could have been an email. The committee request that is not yours to carry. The message that feels pressing because someone else's planning failed. Many of these involve other people's priorities becoming your emergency. This is where many people lose hours without noticing.

4. Neither Urgent nor Important

These are habits that fill time but leave little fruit. Not all leisure belongs here because rest can be deeply important. But mindless scrolling, aimless screen time, and activities that leave you more scattered than when you started often fall into this category.

The framework helps us ask a different kind of question. Not only "What must I do next?" but "What deserves my attention most?" That shift – from reaction to evaluation – is the beginning of discernment.

[SLIDE]

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.

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Pause and reflect:

- What kept those important things from happening?
- What did the urgent things offer you in that moment that the important things did not?
- 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…"

This exercise is designed to reveal patterns and patterns cannot be changed until they are seen.

Most people discover something striking when they complete this audit. The things they say matter most – faith, family, health, presence, peace – almost always sit in the "Important but Not Urgent" category. And those are the very things that get pushed aside first. Not because we chose to abandon them, but because we never quite got around to protecting them.

This is why urgency is so dangerous. It does not usually tempt us with evil. It tempts us with immediate demands that displace lasting priorities. The displacement is quiet, cumulative, and dressed in responsibility.

Consider what that costs over months and years. A week of postponed prayer becomes a month of spiritual dryness. A week of postponed conversation becomes distance in a marriage. A week of postponed rest becomes chronic exhaustion. A week of postponed Sabbath preparation becomes an anxious, hurried Sabbath. None of those losses happen in a single moment of dramatic failure. They happen in the accumulation of small surrenders to what felt urgent.

If you do not decide what is important, the urgent will decide for you.

But the good news is that discernment is a skill and skills can be developed. Recognising the pattern is not the end of the work. It is the beginning of it. The final section of this session offers three simple practices that will help you begin living more intentionally within the week you already have not by adding more, but by protecting what matters most.

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Personal Reflection and Discernment Practices

Awareness opens a door. But awareness alone does not walk through it.

What actually reshapes a life is not a single insight but a series of small, repeated choices – the kind that slowly retrain attention, rebuild trust, and form new habits in the space where old ones used to live. This final section is not about adding more to your week. It is about living more intentionally within the week you already have.

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What follows are three simple practices. You do not need to adopt all three at once. Begin with the one that speaks most directly to what this session has surfaced in you.

1. Know Your Energy, Not Just Your Time

The Discernment Audit revealed where your time has been going. This practice goes one step further and it asks you to pay attention to where your energy is going.

Time and energy are not the same thing. You can spend an hour on something urgent and arrive at the end of it depleted. You can spend an hour on something important and arrive at the end of it restored. Over a week, those differences accumulate. A life structured entirely around urgent demands is not only a misaligned life – it is an exhausted one.

Take a few days this week and notice, without judgment, which activities leave you more alive and which leave you more hollow. Which conversations restore you and which ones drain you. When during the day you have genuine clarity, and when you are simply going through the motions. This is not about eliminating everything that costs energy because some of the most important things we do are demanding. It is about seeing the full picture clearly enough to make wiser choices about what you protect and what you release.

2. Protect One Important Thing

Do not try to redesign your entire life this week.

Choose one thing from the "Important but Not Urgent" category that you have repeatedly postponed. It might be personal prayer without hurry, a weekly conversation with someone you love, a health commitment you keep deferring, or a focused planning block without digital interruption.

Schedule it deliberately. Protect it. Treat it not as a luxury but as a foundation. You will face the temptation to move it when something urgent arrives. That moment is the test. Because what we protect reveals what we value and what we repeatedly sacrifice reveals what urgency has taught us to undervalue.

3. Practise a Daily Pause

Reactive living thrives on uninterrupted momentum. Discernment grows in interruption.

Introduce a brief daily pause, even five minutes, at a fixed point in the day. During that pause, ask yourself three questions: What is demanding my attention right now? What actually deserves my attention? Am I reacting, or am I choosing?

You may pair this with a simple prayer: "Lord, help me see clearly what is mine to carry today."

This is not complicated. It is formative. Repeated pauses retrain reflexes. Over time, the pause becomes instinctive and the space it creates becomes the place where discernment lives.

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If you want to take this further, consider treating the next thirty days as a quiet experiment. Not a programme to complete perfectly, but an invitation to pay attention. Protect one important thing each week. Practise one daily pause. Say no to one thing that is not yours to carry. At the end of thirty days, simply ask: am I living more deliberately than I was? That question, answered honestly, is enough.

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A Final Word

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]

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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

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