

## Time Management and the Missionary

Birch Champeon

In Mark 1, we are given a glimpse of how Jesus conducted his day: He taught in the synagogue. He handled the interruption of the possessed man, and then he continued teaching. He relaxed after teaching. He responded to the emergency with Simon's mother-in-law. Then the sick are brought to him. The next morning he gets up early to pray.

Notice Jesus does what he came to do first. He teaches. There were many other distractions I'm sure, but he worked on his goals first. He handled interruptions with efficiency and gets back to his goals quickly. When he freed the demon possessed man, he could have stopped teaching and began healing the sick and casting out demons, but he didn't. After teaching he went to a home to relax. He was human and needed to relax after teaching, but he also was building relationships during this time. He didn't just go off by himself to rest. Then there is an emergency which he readily handles. Finally we should notice that they *brought* the sick to him. It is clear that the disciples protected Christ's time. In Matthew 19:14 we see Christ telling the disciples to let the children come to him. In the case of the children they were being too protective, but part of the disciples work was to allow Christ to do what he came to do. Finally, we see that Christ started his day early bathed in prayer.

What can we take away from this? We need to handle our interruptions in such a way that we don't lose sight of our goals. We need to protect our time, and use the help that God gives us to do that. We need to rest, and we need to make sure that we are starting our day by turning it over to Him.

### **Interruptions reveal how organized we are**

Interruptions are just part of life, and for missionaries they are almost constant. Any time management system that doesn't allow for interruptions will quickly fall apart on the field. If you haven't organized your work properly, you will quickly find that all you are doing is putting out fires - reacting to whatever emergency comes next. All of the important tasks that you have committed to will get pushed back until they become urgent. The best way that we have found to handle interruptions correctly is to have our work well defined and broken down into "actionable" chunks – pieces of work that have a specific action, like a phone call, an email, research, meeting, etc.

A few years ago I came across a blog talking about a book called "Getting Things Done" by David Allen. Getting Things Done (GTD) is a method designed to organize your work with the least amount of effort while still maintaining full control over your responsibilities. The fact that you are going to get interrupted is built into the system. There are no time charts or A, B, C priorities as these can constantly change. GTD has made a tremendous impact on our day to day work within the ministry.

### **How to get everything done in 5 easy steps :-)**

As you grow up you discover that knowledge work becomes more and more vague. In elementary school everything is completely outlined for the student. In high school there are a few more questions, but if you complete all of the assignment you will probably get an 'A'. In college I was very surprised to find that if I simply completed the assignment I only got a 'C'. It is up to the student to impress the teachers beyond that. As a senior I found that many of my assignments had very few instructions and I was expected to fill in the rest. Young professionals have to decide numerous things within their job description, but as you move up even your job description becomes more vague. Because of all the unknowns it is assumed that knowledge work simply can't be like manual work. There are just too many questions. David Allen's goal for GTD is to pre-define our knowledge work so we can get the unknowns taken care of ahead of time and then just get to work.

The book “Getting Things Done” has advice on planning long and short term goals, how to renegotiate your obligations, and how to dynamically prioritize your work. For this conference I will be focusing on the steps for handling day to day knowledge work. The goal of GTD is to reduce knowledge work to a concrete list of actions that can be worked on as time, energy, and resources permit. GTD defines 5 discrete steps to getting your work organized and getting it done: Collect, Process, Organize, Review, and Do.

### **Collect - Get it all down and out of your head**

In GTD “collect” means to note any ideas and information that we are all bombarded with throughout the day. So the phone number of a potential supporter, a meeting that you forgot about, a great passage for a message, and idea that you need to pass on to your wife. If you do not collect these things in a way that can be easily retrieved then you will probably think of them again and again, until they are completely forgotten or you actually do something about them. Our mind does not give us thoughts when we need them. That's why we think of the fact that we need to buy eggs during church, and think of a message idea while we're at the grocery store trying to remember what we needed to buy.

We must have a system to immediately collect the information that we are bombarded with. It has to be a system that is instantaneous and always available to you. I recommend a notepad wallet, but some people are able to use their smartphone or voice recorder for collection. Collection also includes all the inboxes that collect information for you, like your email and voicemail.

It is not enough to simply collect all the information however. If you do not put the information into a usable system then all the collection in the world will not save you. The information you collect has to be processed.

### **Process – identifying what you have**

The processing step answers the 3 questions “what is this?”, “Do I need to do anything about this?” and “if so, what am I going to do with it?” These 3 questions cut through much of the confusion that we have about the information we get. Everything you collect should be evaluated based on these questions. If you get a card: What is it? It's a birthday card. What are you going to do with it? You have 3 options at this point- You can decide that there is nothing to actually do with the item, you can decide that there is something to do with the item and do it immediately, if it is a very quick task, and you can decide that you must do something and then determine what the very next action is on that item.

Next actions are perhaps the most important aspect to GTD. Next actions identify the very next thing that must be done to move toward the goal that you want to reach. This is not a full plan of every step from now until completion. It is just the very next concrete action (email, phone call, research) that must take place. If something must be done before you can do the next action, then you haven't figured out the true next action. For instance, if you find yourself procrastinating setting up an appointment to get your car fixed, it may be that you have not identified the next action of asking a co-worker where they recommend you service your car. The next action isn't making the appointment, it's getting the name or number of the repair shop.

There is a tremendous advantage to next actions. If you have broken your work down into clear doable next actions, things that you can do as soon as time and resources allow, then you have a list of work that you can plow through, and any interruptions can be handled and then you can return to your list of next actions. Compare this to working on a massive project that does not have defined next actions. You sit down and you are trying to orient yourself to the project and then you get a call. After the call, you start again trying to figure out how your day is going to go. You might get some good ideas of what you are going to do, so you start working. You realize that a number of things you really can't do yet because you haven't done some of the prerequisite tasks. Then the cell phone rings and by the time you finish the call you realize that you only have 15 minutes left before you have to go to a meeting. You can't think of what you could do on the project that would only take 15 minutes and so you check your email...and it's all downhill from there. In this situation it becomes very easy to

get derailed. You're locked into a particular project and every interruption is like hitting a brick wall.

If you have a list of tasks that can all be done, given the time, energy and resources necessary, then you can choose your work based on the ever-changing nature of your day. With email and cell phones our time is becoming more and more fragmented. If we don't have our work pre-planned all those little 15-20 minute blocks will just get wasted.

*Tips for processing:*

- ⤴ Process the top item first.
  - Don't scan for something good.
- ⤴ Process one item at a time.
  - Don't lay everything out on the table, just work sequentially.
- ⤴ Never put anything back into your Inbox, unless interrupted.
  - It only goes one way, you must make a decision.
- ⤴ Don't do the work, just define your work at this point.
- ⤴ There are only 7 possible categories for all your items to go in.
  - Trash, File, Someday/Maybe, Project, Next Action, Calendar, and Waiting for. I have never found anything that didn't fit into one of these categories.
- ⤴ Get good at processing.
  - Information is thrown at us all the time we must be able to process it quickly and get back to work.

**Organize – a place for everything and everything in its place**

Once you process all of the inputs that have come into your day, you must organize those documents, ideas, data, and tasks.

How something is organized depends directly upon your answers to the questions in the previous stage. If the item is not “actionable” then there are only 3 options for that item: Trash, File, Someday/Maybe. Trash is just something you don't need. Files are documents or data you need to refer to later or keep safe. Someday/Maybe are things that might be useful for the future, but really nothing can be done about them now. If the item is actionable, but can't be done in the next 2 minutes then you have to determine which one of 4 places it can go: Projects, Next Actions, Calendar, and the Waiting for List.

If there are multiple actions to do for this item, then it is more than just a simple action. It's a project. A project is simply a collection of multiple actions that are needed to complete a goal. Take a sheet of paper and name the project, determine the desired outcome for the project and write down all the actions you can think of. Add the name of your project to your project list, and then put the next action for that project on your next action list. If the item isn't a project, but has a next action then add that action to the Next action list. The next action list should be broken up into “contexts”. C

Contexts are the type of work that the action involves like: calls, email, office, research, home, Bob. This sorts your actions into their location or the type of task. So all the calls you need to make are all together on a single list. Breaking things down into contexts makes your work much more efficient than jumping from one project to another. It seems unintuitive at first, but once you get a whole bunch of work done in a short period of time you will understand the genius of it.

If the action has to be done on a particular date then it goes on the calendar. Actions should only be put on one

calendar. If you have multiple places to keep information, you will miss something important.

One of the most useful insights of GTD is the “waiting for” list. This list contains items and actions that cannot be done because you are waiting on someone else to complete something before you can continue. Having a waiting for list is a great way to keep track of things that you are expecting from others, and allows you to remind them of their commitments to you. Often you will discover mis-communications when you remind the other person about the task that you need done.

### **Review – what are we going to do**

Reviews are what keeps GTD going. In interviews, David Allen has said that if you aren't doing your reviews then you aren't really doing GTD. There are two types of review – Daily and Weekly.

The daily review involves quickly processing the new items in your inbox, and then looking at your calendar and finally scanning your next actions for what work you need to do. If you have lined up all your work in the previous steps then scanning your lists should be simple.

The weekly review is a full complete review of all of your work. This will take about an hour or two each week. You will need to process all incoming information, creating tasks and projects as necessary. You will also review all of your next actions, waiting for, calendar and project tasks. Scan through your someday/maybe folder to make sure that “someday” hasn't come.

### **Do – Finally, get to work**

“Do” is just that: doing the work you have chosen from your list of next actions. Think about what context you are in. Are you at the office? See what tasks you have assigned to the office. Is this a good time to call people? Then crank through the calls that you need to make. The goal of all the previous steps is to have all your work pre-defined so you can work through it as efficiently as possible. Getting back to work after you have been interrupted is just a matter of scanning your next actions list.

If you find there is a task that you are procrastinating on, see if you can break the task down into smaller steps, or if there is another next action that must be done first. If it is something that must be done and can't be broken down, then put it in the center of your desk the night before. When I start in the morning I won't do anything but that. Brian Tracy compares this to eating a frog. If you walked in to your office and you had to eat a whole live frog, you might try to get around it and make it easier, but after a while you would realize that the only way to do it is to just EAT IT. Some tasks are like big nasty bullfrogs and they just have to get done. My wife and I will ask each other, “Do you have any frogs you're avoiding?” You'll feel a lot better after you've choked it down.

Using these methods we can take so much of the guesswork out of the work that we do. You won't be sitting at your desk thinking, “I know I'm supposed to be doing something, I just can't figure out what it is.” Your work will be clearly outlined in such a way that when interruptions come you can handle them and get back to your work quickly.

If we are going to truly redeem the time we can't let interruptions control our lives and overwhelm our goals and our calling.

### **Recommended Resources:**

Allen, David. *Getting things done : the art of stress-free productivity*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Hummel, Charles. *Tyranny of the urgent*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Meridian, 1995.

Tracy, Brian. *Eat that frog! : 21 great ways to stop procrastinating and get more done in less time*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007.

[www.activeinboxhq.com](http://www.activeinboxhq.com)

[gtdsupport.netcentrics.com](http://gtdsupport.netcentrics.com)

*Birch has been the Technical Coordinator for Bibles International since 2001. He develops software to assist with Bible translation and has worked in S.E. Asia, South America and Africa training nationals to use technology to assist with their Bible translation projects. In addition to training in technology, he has conducted training for national colleagues on numerous topics from time management to family issues. He and his wife, Connie, have twin sons. Much of the time they are able to travel as a family and minister together.*