Handling time pressure and the stress that accompanies it

[Written in the context of mission teams but applicable more widely.]

Remember the Russian icebreaker in the Antarctic last December (2013). In 1914 Ernest Shackleton led his second expedition to the pack ice of the Weddell Sea in the Antarctic. Sadly, his ship was trapped in the pack ice of the Weddell Sea. The pressure of thousands of tonnes of ice gradually crushed the ship like a matchbox.

The crew with Shackleton loaded their food and supplies onto the lifeboats and dragged the boats to the open sea. One of the boats with Shackleton as pilot made the epic sea journey in an open boat to South Georgia to alert rescuers.

I have never been to the Antarctic probably you haven't either. But we know what it feels like to be locked in pack ice. To battle with time pressure is often to feel trapped and crushed. It might be the demands of gaining a residence visa, the demands of the ministry or the complexities of the team. It might be the pressure of family and friends at home and the need to keep in touch with them as well as maintain a support base.

These things can first pin us in the ice and then slowly crush us from all directions. Wanting to be "spiritual" is just another pressure on an already overloaded lifestyle. We are stressed!

In the United Kingdom, the National Health Service spends billions annually on drugs to treat anxiety, depression and stress. About 67% of visits to family doctors are prompted by stress-related symptoms. Stress is a major contributor to heart disease, lung disease, accidental injuries and suicide.

As believers, we are not immune! How then can we be wise and not get into the pack ice? We need to take evasive action so that we won't be caught. We need to reduce time pressure even for the busiest of people/workers.

Avoiding the submerged icebergs (remember the Titanic!)

Seven common icebergs:

The problems we have with time pressure are usually exacerbated by personal attitudes that are often unconscious – below the waterline. We must steer as rapidly as we can away from them.

<u>Iceberg One</u>: the drive for success and achievement.

- There is no room for failure in our culture especially as it relates to our spiritual task, hence the pressure to achieve or go to the wall – success is everything!
- Our drive for excellence is like a river in full flood. It must be kept within its banks or it will burst the banks causing damage and trouble.
- This drive for success can cause our prayer life to be eroded. We need to repent of this.
- The drive to advance our ministry often consumes time that needs to be reserved for family and friends. Slowly the iceberg begins to crush us!
- There is the drive for affirmation – in family life love and affirmation may only come from academic or athletic success. Even middle-aged men (perhaps more than women) allow their passion for affirmation to "break their banks".
- Time reserved for relaxation in the family is often ploughed into work.
- In reality the drive for achievement is really a drive for affirmation. We must be "successful" for then we are affirmed. But this is like taking drugs! It will kill us!

<u>Iceberg Two</u>: perfectionism and insecurity

- The drive for excellence can very easily break the river banks.
  - ✓ the house tidied so there's not even a speck of dust (not a disease of most workers!)
  - ✓ always one more set of figures to be checked
  - ✓ clothes immaculately ironed

  } Not a problem for most workers but the equivalent in Arab culture
- The problem is that the time to become "perfect" in anything will eat into the time available for other more crucial tasks.
- Perfectionism always leads to severe time pressure.
- Insecurity creates great pressure. The easy way to get ourselves out of this pack ice is to delegate tasks to others. D. L. Moody said, *"It is better for 10 men to do the work of one, than for one man to do the work of 10!"*
- The problem with insecurity is that we find it difficult to delegate any work to others because we hope they won't do it better than we have been doing!

<u>Iceberg Three</u>: indiscipline

Looking at successful people and reading their biographies, it is clear that the Lord Jesus has used in mission a wide diversity of natural and spiritual gifts. But there is a common denominator – personal discipline. Discipline is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23).

An example: David Livingstone began working in a cotton mill when he was 10 years old. He worked from 6 am until 10 pm with half an hour for breakfast and an hour the lunch – an 11½ hour working day! When he got home studied. He mastered Latin – a requirement to get into university – and all other required subjects. By the time he was 27 he had studied both medicine and theology and got degrees in both. This discipline helped him a great deal in Africa.

<u>Iceberg Four</u>: bad management

Some people are good at self-discipline, but are poor managers. They have zero time management skills! Time management courses are a growth industry. There is nothing very spiritual about learning to use our time wisely. It is a skill that can be learned. So we should never lack time. Brother Andrew said, *"If you want something done quickly, ask the busiest person to do it, for they always have time for unselfish service!"*

<u>Iceberg Five</u>: doing tasks we are not gifted for

The reward for work done well is more work! One survey revealed that 80% of leaders spent most of their time doing things they were not good at!

In the UK on average, Anglican ministers have a 61 hour working week. They spend ~ 27.5 hours in administration and travel and 2.5 hours in private prayer. All ministers interviewed spent most of their time doing things they were not trained for – teaching, counselling, evangelism and leadership development! Their training was in theology!

The apostles refused to be diverted from the Word of God and prayer. So when there was an extra responsibility they swiftly delegated that responsibility to other able men. Consequently the church movement continued to accelerate. This is very hard to do on a small team in two cities!

<u>Iceberg Six</u>: overspending/underspending (probably not so much of an issue)

- **Overspending** – this is not so noticeable in our company but consumerism is the basic norm of our British society. Advertising has the goal of creating an appetite to consume more – instant loans and credit schemes. Success implies new work, bigger, better etc.
  - ✓ Cars have become status symbols – we "wear them" rather than drive them!
  - ✓ Homes are statements of our financial worth – size, location etc.

We need to opt out of this madness! Tension, stress and time pressure result from the demands of these "Babylonian values".

- **Underspending** can also be a source of time pressure. Microwaves or other electrical gadgets can often be used to save valuable time. This is quite common in our company!

<u>Iceberg Seven</u>: panic

Objective analysis of how we use our time – "residence work", family, ministry during an average week reveals not so much a lack of time but a **sense of inadequacy and inferiority**. It is not the amount of work, but the sense of not being able to cope with it. The strain builds up within us. In this area we need to open up to those we trust. There are several possibilities to consider:

- Are we in the wrong job?
- Do we have responsibilities we are not gifted to take on?

We often lack the objectivity needed to discern this since our sense of inadequacy is deep-seated. We need counsel. Panic is very tragic.

A Biblical perspective on this

The Bible doesn't teach much about the stewardship of time. This isn't because time is unimportant, but because the **Biblical focus is on people**. As we are transformed by all God's resources – including the use of time – we will learn to use time effectively.

In the Bible the emphasis is on **character** and **wholeness** that leads believers to be effective and efficient in every sphere of life including time.

- The Lord Jesus taught there was always enough time to do the work of God.
- He corrected his disciples, ***"Are there not 12 hours in a day?"*** (Jn. 11:9)
- He demonstrated a steady, quiet confidence in His Father's protection and provision including the provision of adequate time to accomplish His work.
- He had 3½ years of ministry and was confident that He had finished the work that His Father had given him to do!

Our problem is not time, but priorities and having the spiritual discipline to fulfil them!

After being anointed by the Holy Spirit, the Lord Jesus withdrew for six weeks to ascertain the Father's priorities for His brief ministry. We would greatly simplify our lives if we identified the priorities God has given us!

Our problem with the difficulty of spiritual disciplines is not that we don't have time for studying the Bible and prayer but that we find it very difficult!

D. E. Hoste, one of the Cambridge seven and the former director of CIM who took over from Hudson Taylor, had an outstanding prayer life. He said, *"I have found the need for much watchfulness and self-discipline in this matter … a sensitive conscience about the use of time needs to be maintained"*.

Here are five Biblical perspectives on the use of time

1. **Undervaluing or overvaluing time**

   Overvaluing time is similar to the problem we have with money. We can become neurotic about every wasted minute and every penny/cent spent. We easily become nervous and tense. Every interruption increases our blood pressure and every minute lost adds to our inner frustration and turmoil.

   Undervaluing time and wasting time that could have been wisely use and turned to good also creates great stress.

Life is like a violin string it can be under too much tension and may possibly break or it can be under too little tension. Both extremes give the wrong note! We are generally on the side of overvaluing time.

It is possible to be "well-tuned" – never in a hurry because we are always in "haste". The key is to concentrate on one thing at a time. Time is a creation of God. We must control time and never let it control us. One thing that will help is to "give it away" when someone is in need of it!

2. **Balancing our time**

In Ezekiel chapter 1 and Revelation chapter 4 there is a description of the four living creatures that surround the throne of God. They are mysterious creatures and they represent the creatorial order in its pristine condition – unspoiled by sin. The living creatures have four faces: a lion, an ox, a man and an eagle. The faces reflect various aspects of God's creation including time. Taken together they should help us to balance our time.

The lion face: the lion is the "king" of the animal world exercising authority and control. In exercising authority over time we should be **lion-like** – ruling over it rather than being constantly "under it" – especially in spiritual warfare.

The ox face: an ox is a beast of burden and hard work – a serving animal. A percentage of our time should be as a **servant** – prepared to come under the yoke and pull the load.

The man face (human face): this indicates quality time for meaningful relationships – not as an option, but as part of bearing the image of God on the earth.

The eagle face: Eagles ascend to the heights and soar in the heavenlies. This "face" should characterise a segment of our time. We ascend into the heavenlies in prayer and soar on the thermals of the Holy Spirit.

We see all four of these "faces" beautifully harmonised in the Lord Jesus. He had the face of an ox – **coming not to be served but to serve**. He had the wings of an eagle and would soar into His Father's presence in prayer and adoration! As **a lion of the tribe of Judah**, he exercised authority and refused to capitulate to the pressure of the enemy. But he had time to attend weddings and feast with his friends as well as have dinner parties with his enemies. **He was a man among men**.

So as we seek to balance our time, we should check to see if we are reflecting all four faces of the living creatures.

- Do you have time to work but no time for relationships?
- Do you schedule time to ascend like the eagle into your Father's presence?
- Are you in control of your time, exercising lion-like authority and dominion or is time controlling you?
- Do you have a "human face" or are you a machine churning out projects and papers but having no time for relationships with people?

Spirituality is reflecting all four faces in every aspect of living – time, friendship, goals, work etc.

3. **Injecting your time with eternity**

We have received eternal life, so a timeless quality should pervade every activity we are involved in. As those who have eternity in our hearts, we are seeking to go beyond measuring activities by time and learning to fill activities with eternity. We are to seek to press meaning into all that we do. So we are not just trying to cram every hour with activity, but we are trying to learn how to fill each activity with eternity!

The tragedy of life in the fast lane is that the hedgerows become a blur! We fail to see – let alone enjoy – the wonder of God's creation. In injecting time with eternity, we need to see and appreciate the wonder of the world that God has made. We need to really enjoy it!

4. **Staying within our limits**

George Whitfield said, *"The more I did for Christ, the more I found I could do."* There is nothing unspiritual about a life crammed with activity. On occasions, the Lord Jesus did not have enough time to eat. The most godly people are often the most active. The heart of the issue is not a contemplative life versus an active life. However, there are some boundaries and if we stay within these Biblical boundaries we can work as long as we like.

- **We must know our limits and stay within them.**

  John Wesley said, *"Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry, because I never undertake more work than I can go through with calmness of spirit!"* Some Christian leaders work effectively for about 100 hours per week. My upper limit is much less. If I go beyond my limits, my effectiveness drops off dramatically both in quality and quantity.

  Some people can function on four or five hours sleep. This makes me envious! I need eight hours of sleep to function well. Wisdom is knowing our limits and staying within them.

- **If we borrow time we must pay it back.**

  To meet deadlines we may have to work late and rise early. Our time with family may be dramatically shortened. This is inevitable and we shouldn't feel guilty about it. However, we must pay back borrowed time. **Events may be deferred but never cancelled** – trips, meals out etc. can be deferred till next week – especially for family, friends, contacts etc.

- **There is nothing wrong with being busy as long as we are equally active in prayer.**

  Look at the Lord Jesus. His life was extraordinarily busy, yet he would take time to pray through the night or rise early in the morning. If we don't **make** time to pray we are in danger of "the barrenness of a busy life" (Fred Mitchell). There is no legalism here. There will be times of huge pressure of work and extraordinary demands on our time, but we need to recognise that these times are **abnormal**. God will help us, feed us spiritually and keep our hearts at peace during these times. The danger is when the abnormal becomes normal and spiritual disciplines are abandoned and no longer part of our daily lives.

5. **Living in the present**

Creation itself comes one day at a time. The rhythm of life is segmented, ***"There was evening and there was morning – the first day"*** (Gen. 1:5 – also vs. 8, 13, 19, 21 and 23). Man was created on day six only to find that his first full day – day seven – was a day off! He was to begin life by learning that it was to be enjoyed one day at a time!

One of the keys to life is to be free from anxiety and stress and this implies that we should live life in the same units that God gives us – one day at a time. ***"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself."*** (Mt. 6:34) So **today** is a big enough amount of time to do something with, but not enough to overwhelm us with worries and responsibilities. Yesterday has gone. It is irretrievable. Tomorrow is only a concept and when it arrives it will be today.

The temptation of the old is to live in the past – "the good old days". The temptation of the young is to live in the future – things will be better – after I leave school … after graduation… after marriage … after promotion and more money etc. The danger of both these attitudes is that we fail to grasp the **now** – **today**. It is **today** that we receive God's grace. It is **today** that

we experience God's power. When tomorrow comes, it will be today and the miracles will be repeated!

Even hard work is health-giving when the mind is at rest. It produces fatigue, but not tension. The cause of strain is found in the mind not in the body. Hudson Taylor wrote, *"As to work, mine was never so plentiful, so responsible or so difficult; but the weight and the strain are all gone."* He had discovered the reality of the daily invitation of the Lord Jesus to come and rest. One of his favourite hymns was:

"Jesus I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art
I am finding out the greatness of Your loving heart"

This remained true for him even during the Boxer Rebellion when many of his workers were being martyred.

Floating free

Getting out of the pack ice is never easy. It is easier these days with massive great icebreakers. A hundred years ago some had to abandon their ship and drag their lifeboats out into the open sea. It is not easy to get free of time pressure for there is no equivalent to nuclear powered icebreakers! But here are a few suggestions that should help us to float free of the time pressure we are under.

1. **Analyse how we spend time**

Many work a 40-hour week leaving another 128 hours to manage. We rarely study how we spend those 128 hours. Workers who are responsible to plan their own working week rarely bother to analyse how they use their time. We need to read a book on time management with various charts on how to analyse how we spend our time. There are three really important questions:

- What should I be doing with my time? What am I called to do? What am I gifted to do?
- What am I actually doing with my time?
- What steps can I take to move from what I am actually doing to what I should be doing?

The third question is a tough one. There are endless possibilities – take on extra staff/secretarial help – train others to do some of the work – delegate some of the responsibilities – resign and join another organisation! Unless we make progress in this area, we will fail in the use of the gifts God has given us and the wise use of time.

For young families, the difficult period is from when the children come home from school until they go to bed ~ 4.00 pm to 8.00 pm. Parents need to make sure they use this time wisely.

2. **Diary planning**

Sadly the urgent always seems to squeeze out the important. The only way to protect the important is to plan effectively. So times for devotions and family time must be diaried in so they can be preserved from erosion. They are **firm commitments**. Unless this is so, they are likely to disappear when other demands are imposed on us.

John Stott was told early on in his ministry to take "a quiet day once a month". Go to the countryside where you won't be disturbed. Stand back and review, look ahead and consider where you're going. Allow yourself to be drawn up into the mind and perspective of God. Try to see things as He sees them. Relax! Later on, as John Stott became world famous, he moved from one day a month to one day every week. We all need some **"planned unavailability"**!

3. **Creativity**

Instead of trying to squeeze more into an already overfull schedule, do some lateral thinking. Can you do two things at the same time? Sadly, we can't be in two places at the same time, but we can do two tasks at the same time! If you need to spend an hour or two talking with someone, go for a

walk with them so you get some exercise at the same time. Often the informality of going for a walk causes people to open up more. If you're visiting people, it may be appropriate to take along your children/grandchildren. The elderly love to see young people and you can have time with them in the car while driving to the appointment and back?

Anwar Sadat, while he was president of Egypt, would always involve his children in his work. When foreign dignitaries arrived at Cairo airport he and his children were there to greet them. His children were with him at a variety of other state occasions.

You can listen to worship music in the car and worship as you drive.

Many of us are in a rut, having done the same things for decades and an injection of creativity will do wonders in reducing time pressure and carving out space for other activities.

4. **Rhythms in your life**

Various tasks are best done at different times of the day or week. One man found he couldn't prepare the message he had to give on Sunday on the previous Monday. By Thursday or Friday he found he could concentrate better. He found that the best time for him to do creative work was in the morning. Afternoons were best for "people time" when he was more reflective and insightful.

We have different "low performance times" such as early afternoon. If it is quiet enough, I easily fall asleep at this time. We need to discover our "prime times" – the important hours when we are alert and can be uninterrupted. Don't waste your prime times doing routine tasks like filing, housework or shopping. When your creative energy has worn down, that is the time to do chores.

Understanding our rhythms is a key to optimum personal performance. Winston Churchill was unusual. He divided the 24 hours of the day into two equal parts for then he found he could work faster, concentrate better and accomplish more. He worked late into the night. He often stayed in bed until noon and accomplished much in bed! He had another sleep in the early evening.

5. **Discerning black holes**

Astronomically a "black hole" is an area of space that absorbs all electromagnetic radiation including light. There are some people who in some way resemble a "black hole". They have an almost infinite capacity to suck away our time and energy. Not all who want to talk to you are sent by the Lord Jesus! Perhaps many are! There are some people who are mentally or emotionally damaged and deserve a great deal of our time. They are not black holes.

So how do you discover who are those in genuine need and who are black holes? Ask the person who repeatedly comes to talk and ask your help, to help you in some small task – washing-up, mowing the lawn, washing the car etc. "Black holes" only want to receive and they are not prepared to give anything. Those who need your time – the emotionally damaged – are usually only too happy to help you. Often it helps reaffirm their value – the very thing they are struggling to re-establish.

Such reciprocation not only replaces frustration with friendship, but brings back blessing to you. As a bonus, after they have been healed and no longer need your support, they may continue to do the gardening or wash the car.

6. **Mobility/travel**

Travel time by train/bus/plane can be study time. It takes time to learn to concentrate under almost any conditions. Travel is a prime candidate for time management. But it gets harder as you get older! During his time preaching, John Wesley covered over 25,000 miles on horseback. Most of this time he spent reading/praying/preparing messages/writing tracts and books!

Sabbath rests

Gordon MacDonald in his book **Ordering Your Private World** makes a distinction between leisure and rest (a Sabbath rest).

A Sabbath rest is a **necessity** not a **luxury**. We have tended to confuse a Sabbath rest with having a holiday – leisure and amusement – a break from the routine. Holidays may be enjoyable and physically relaxing. They are helpful in a momentary way, but they do not last! So a Sabbath rest is not fun-filled moments, laughter or recreation, for those by themselves don't restore the soul in the way that we long for. Leisure is important. We need mental breaks and physical exercise, but it doesn't replace the need for inner Sabbaths.

What is an inner Sabbath?

It has been described as swapping a microscope for a telescope. Looking at our lives and work is often an issue of looking at the little details of our life and work. In time management the detail is important. It is looking at deadlines, training courses, work and family responsibility.

A Sabbath is a time to step back and look at the big picture. Like God on the seventh day, we cease from our labour to see what we have achieved and hopefully, like God, we will be able to declare it to be very good (Gen. 1:31). The telescope helps us to project beyond the immediate so we get future direction and meaning to what we are doing now.

Inner Sabbaths – a few days away alone with God (a retreat) – will help us to avoid the barrenness of a busy life and renew our vitality and drive.

7. **Quality time with people**

In time spent with people, it is the quality of time spent rather than the quantity. So when with people, give them your total attention. Do this with your children as well. How easy it is to half listen to their eager chatter with only a token interest.

How unlike the Lord Jesus! To be with Him, even for a single conversation, was life-changing and unforgettable. He didn't have a lot of time with people, but what time He had was filled with an eternal quality that left a lasting impact!

Conclusion

So we must control our time for our own personal survival, but also for Kingdom purposes. We live in the midst of growing disintegration. People are hurting, lonely and in need of help. They need people to whom they can go knowing they will be welcomed and listened to. We must find the time to help others and be to “the others” a person that people can go to and find a welcome and healing. Getting out of the pack ice is not merely to improve **our** “comfort zone”, but to create such a “zone” for others in need.