Presentation Transcript
Time Management for Christians – Incoming
By Bill Jacobs
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Our title today is *Incoming*. It's about the crush of information that so many of us have to deal with every day. It's just like an attack – a barrage of incoming. This is the fourth and final presentation in the series *Time Management for Christians*. We saved this one for last because the three previous ones are really more fundamental.

God knows that some of us can be organized more easily than others. It's a temperament thing sometimes – or it's a mood thing sometimes. I'm sure there is a host of other reasons to explain why some are more organized than others, but for whatever reason, if we are *more* organized in managing our time, we can be happier people. Now, nobody's ever been perfectly organized, so this isn't an "all or nothing" deal. It's "any improvement helps." I know I've always struggled with it. And, in my 60s, I was forced to get more organized, because I had more things to do than I could do in the, then current, state of "going with the flow," which had always been what I kind of did. But I learned from that change in my life that even I could be organized – tightly so. And I've found that it makes life easier.

So I've told you, in this series, about two books that helped me get organized. One is the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, by Stephen Covey. This book is about how to prioritize the use of time to match our values – very important for Christians. Right? The second book, called *Getting Things Done*, by Richard Allen – I haven't really talked too much about it yet. It's about how to manage all the incoming – the demands on our time every day – email, text, voicemail, social media, chores, filing, meetings, work, social activities, etcetera. The influx of things to respond to, organize, manage can prevent us from getting into the things that really matter the most in our lives. So in this book, *Getting Things Done*, I found a flow chart that shows how to deal with all the incoming stuff.

I don't know about you, but when I'm faced with a big pile of stuff, or it feels like I have more to do than I can, I start getting anxious. And that makes it even harder to organize. So, with this

flow chart, I have a plan. And I've used it now for several years, and it's in my mind. I don't need to look at a piece of paper any longer to make it work. I just automatically start going through that process – that flow chart – to make order out of the chaos that comes at me every day. Each incoming piece, handled according to this chart, makes it easy to handle massive amounts of what David Allen calls *stuff*.

I put this off until last because having roles and goals comes first. They're the reason we need this flow chart. So the chart actually gives us the ability to give full attention to what's important, because we can get the stuff out of the way.

Okay, the first thing to think about in this flow chart is, the *stuff* goes into an in-basket. And that could be mail, or your have an inbox for your email. It could be texts. It could be voicemail. It could be just phone calls in the moment, Facebook messages – you know, there's a Messenger thing on Facebook – Instagram, other social media, what your kids want and need, the list of honey-do's. You can think of specific incoming items for you – everything that comes at us from every direction. And you might have a physical basket to put things in. It might be a pile of mail just in from the mailbox. It might be the inbox in your email. It might be the host of messages in your Facebook. So how do you get all that together? It might be notes left on the bar by your mate, or email sent to you by them. Whatever it is, get in the habit of looking at all of it every day – just for a short time.

And, as you look at each piece, ask this question: Is it actionable? *Actionable*, in getting things done terminology, means does it require you to do something? So, you know, this isn't really that hard, is it? Most of us do this all the time. We sort through the mail and throw out the junk. We send junk email to the Junk Box or delete it.

In this work flow, what do we do with items that are *not* actionable – like the junk mail? Well, the first thing that most of it goes into is the trash – the physical trash, the email trash, some other electronic trash. Okay now, just think about that. Think about your pile of mail. Right there, most of the incoming stuff is taken care of. It's unessential. You don't have to do anything with it. Same thing with email. If you've got a lot of junk coming in, you can just delete it all.

Are there other types of non-actionable items besides trash? Well, yes, there are. There are what we could call, just broadly, *reference material* that comes in – things you might want to store for future reference. You might say, "Yeah, but storing it is an action." True, but you can put that in a box for now and then make an action later to empty the box. I have a vertical file on my cabinet near my little desk at home. And on the top level, there's a label that says, "In." That's my physical in-basket. And then next, after that, is "File." That's stuff that I said, "No," to when I asked, "Is it actionable," but I want to keep it. The next one says, "Elaine." That's stuff to give her that requires no action on my part. The next one is "Bedroom." We have a safe in our bedroom, but I don't want to go there to put things in it until I've gone through my inbox, so rather than just tossing it aside, and it getting mixed in with other stuff, I have a place to put it

until I'm ready to put it away. While I look at the inbox everyday, I only look at the other ones when they're full. Then I deliver them where they ought to be put. Or, if I happen to going in the bedroom, I might take it in then.

Okay, so there you have "Trash" and "Reference." There's also one more category of things that you might want to keep, but don't have to do anything with it right now. And we can call that "Some Day/Maybe." You're not ready to throw it away, but you have no immediate actionable use for it. You know, you got some junk mail about a vacation in Maui, for example, and you think, "Well, I might want to look at that later and think about going there." Or, your REI sale catalog arrives – you know, there's something you might want to look at, but you don't have time for it right now.

So, all the items in these three categories – Trash, Reference and Some Day/Maybe – wound up where they are because, when we ask the question, "Is it actionable?" – that is, "Do I need to do something with this?" – the answer was, "No." What happens when the answer is, "Yes." Well, then it's actionable. There's something we need to do with it. So let's look at that now.

What is this? Is it actionable? If the answer is, "Yes," and it can take less than two minutes, just do it right now. A client texted me last week, and asked, "Is my appointment at 1:00 or 2:00?" and I simply replied to their text with the numeral 1. So, do it, if it's less than two minutes. If it's longer, then there are two other things to do in answer to the question, "What is the next action?"

You can delegate it. A client wanted to know – and she sent me a text – if she owed me any co-pay still. So I sent a text to Elaine and asked her if she could find out for me. And I made a note that I'm waiting on her to get back to me, so that I don't forget to follow up. When I get the answer from her, it'll go into the basket and run through the decision tree again. Is it actionable? Yes. Can I call this client in two minutes? No, probably. We'll talk more about what happens when it goes that way. So, when I get the answer, it's going to go in the basket and run through the process. How did I get it in the basket? Well, I do all this in a computer app, so I copied the text that the client sent me into my app's inbox. If you're doing it with paper, you could write down the substance of what you were told on a Post-it or a card and drop it in the in-basket.

What else might we do? If we can't delegate it, then it follows that we need to do it ourselves, so what would we do with it if we didn't have time to do it right now – we couldn't delegate it and it wasn't shorter than two minutes? Well, we could defer it. If you can't do it now, because it's a future action with a date and time, then it goes on a calendar – "session with John Smith at 4 pm." If it's something I *could* do right now, but I'm busy with other things, I put it on what David Allen would call his "Next Actions" list. Most of us would call that a "To Do" list. Why does he call it "Next Actions," instead of a "To Do" list? Well, the answer to that question opens up the real power of getting things done. He calls it "Next Actions" because, when we make a plan to accomplish something that's more complex than just a few things, there will be things in our project that we can't get done until something else is finished first.

For example, you're going to grocery shopping. But to effectively grocery shop, you need to first check your cabinets to see what you need and then put it on a list. And then you need to *go* grocery shopping. And then you need to come home and put the stuff away. So you could say that there are four actions just in going grocery shopping. So I can't put it away until I've bought it, and I can't buy it until I put it on a list, and I can't put it on a list until I've checked to see what I need. So that's a sequential project you have, and you can't do the other things until the first one's done, because there are several actions instead of just one.

So let's see how to use projects now. If we go back to stuff in the basket, and we look at a request for sessions from a new client, and ask what it is, we find out that it *is* actionable. So then it goes to "What's the next action?" Well, helping someone overcome depression takes more than one action – a *lot* more – so I'm going to create a project for that client.

Have you ever been to the dentist and seen the open filing cabinet with your dentist's patient folders in it? Each one of those folders is a project with a client's name on it. He has records about the work he's done on your teeth and things that need to be done in the future, maybe, in that folder.

So now that I have a folder for my client, I need to take time to figure out what I need to do to help him. So populating that project folder is an action itself. If it's not a complicated project, I might just use a page in a notebook.

I told you about my A5 notebook for projects. I have an idea for a project and I write it down in that bigger notebook, and I start filling in things on the page. And as things come up that are ready to do – you know, I've made my grocery list and now it's time to go shopping. So I would put "go grocery shopping" in the back of my little field notebook, as something that's actionable. And when I have time to go grocery shopping, I would then copy that in the front of the little notebook to the date where I'm going to do all those things. And I would line it out in that list of actionable items. When I'm working with a client, usually there are some things that need to be done now as I create the folder. Some need to be done at the first session, some need to be done every week in repeating fashion, and some come way down the road.

I remember once I decided that my computer client data needed to be better organized and better protected. And we also have LifeResource stuff – all kinds of things – presentations, notes, all that – that we don't want to lose. So I created a backup scheme for our computers and phones. That's a project. And some of the project involved physical drives at home and at work – different locations – some of it involved off-site cloud backup. You know, you have your computer backed up on a hard disc in your house, but what if a burglar takes it? So it's better to have it saved somewhere else, if you can. And because I'm working with clients, their confidentiality must be protected, so I had to think about HIPPA compliance – on and off-site storage. So all drives need to be encrypted and HIPPA data needs to be stored on sites that even the cloud staff can't access. So it took me a month, in my spare time, to create a plan for it. I

worked on it as I had time. And it was easy to come back to, because I had an outline of what I was planning to do, and I'd just pick up where I left off. Well, once I got the plan completed, I had to do research on where to buy stuff, and what to get, and all that. So that was the first phase of the plan. It took me a year to implement all that. Some things remained in the project folder and other things went into my "Next Actions" list as it came up to do them. A bit of it even went on my calendar, because they were things I needed to do at specific times.

So using this system, I was able to accomplish – for me – a really involved project, yet my mind was not filled with the clutter of it, because I never saw any of it until it was time to do something. How does that happen? By the way, right now my computer inbox is empty, my main inbox is empty, my physical inbox on my desk is empty. So, inbox – zero! Do I have anything to do? Well, I have hundreds of things to do, but it feels like I'm free right now, because all the other things that I have to do won't come into view until it's time to do them.

So there's one more aspect of this system to explain and that's called *review*. You remember the little notebook I told you about a minute ago. It's a 3 x 5 Moleskine or Fields Notes book, and each week you look at all your projects – whether on your computer or in a notebook – and you see what actions in each project are available to do. And you add these to the notebook at the back. So you're working back – from the back to the front – with items to do and from the front to the back with days of the week when you do them. When you meet in the middle, it's time for a new notebook. And, as you add these things to the back of the notebook, and as you look at your projects in a weekly fashion, you make any additions or changes to the projects you have. Do this weekly. Things change. Sometimes you think your project is going to go one way, and then you do research and learn, "Oh, that's not going to work," and you need to change it. So you make your changes on a weekly basis.

Then, every day, you look in the back of the notebook, and select "Next Actions" for today. Take it from me. You'll do better if you stick to about five or six of those things, instead of putting more on there than you can possibly do. You'll wind up doing the most important ones if you limit it. And you write those under today's date. And, as you write them under today's date in the front, you line them out in the back so that you know that you've got a day picked to do those things. And then, as you do them through the day, you check them off as you go. If you don't finish one of them – or two – you can do one of two things. You can either put it back in the list of things to do, or you can move it to the next day. So, when you're looking at your daily log of things to do, you're never going to see anything except what you need to do that day. Your mind is clear.

Another way to help manage this, if you're using the paper system, is to have a file by your desk with 43 folders in it. There's one folder for each month of the year – that's 12 – and one for each day of the month – so that would be 31 – so 43 folders. And let's, in the example, say it's January 1. You would see a file folder with 12 monthly folders in it, beginning with January, and behind January would be 31 folders – one for each day of the month. On January 2nd, you would take the

January 1st folder and you would put it behind February. And you just keep doing that. So now, the next day, when you go into your file, you'll see January 2nd, and there's that folder and any of the things you put in there to do. If it's paperwork, you can just do it then, or you can put a note in your little book to do it at a later time. Let's say you have bills due on the 10th and the 15th. On the first, those two bills come in, so you put one in day 10 and one in day 15 in the folders. So each day you move the front folder behind January to February. So when the 10th comes up – when it's the first one in the list – you open it and you find the bill in there that you need to pay that day. So the future keeps coming to you as you work your way through this folder.

So using this simple chronological file, a file for projects, a notebook for on-the-go and daily items, probably a filing cabinet for reference and records, you're good to go. Of course, I do all this on my Mac using an app called *OmniFocus*. There's also a sister app for the iPhone as well. And the two of them sync, so anything you do on your phone goes to the Mac. Anything you do on the Mac goes to the phone. The things that intrigues me about the phone app is, they have a button on it called *Nearby*. And, if you've assigned a location for anything – let's say you have to go to the grocery store to buy your groceries – that's on your to-do list – if you've assigned a location for your grocery store and locations to other errands you need to run in the area, if you push *Nearby*, it'll tell you which other things on your to-do list you're close to, so you can go get them done if you want to. Pretty hard to do that on paper.

I can also talk projects into Actions. You can dictate into the phone app. You can take pictures of notes and assign them to Actions – notes, instructions – and I can add them to my Inbox on my *OmniFocus* program. With a click, I can copy emails into my system inbox. So every time I get an email that asks me to do something, I just stick it in my *OmniFocus*, and then I delete everything else. In addition to that, I can set up actions and projects so that I never see them in my daily view until it's time to do something with them.

A few months ago, I tried to shift to paper, and found that things seemed to jump out at me in a good way, but there was so much writing and copying that I went back to my computer system, though I think I'm probably busier than most of the people I know. So paper would probably work for 99% – maybe not 99% – but maybe 80% of the people I know. Also I learned that it was much easier to plan projects on the computer. It's easier to move things around and get things organized in a linear fashion.

Okay, so that's the flow chart that I use. And I've used it so much I just automatically do it in my mind. In the first few weeks, I was looking at the chart and I was amazed at how comforting it was to know that I could get through this big pile of junk in short order and have a way to deal with everything that happens, and not let things get away from me. In one of David Allen's YouTube videos, he's speaking at a – I think – Silicone Valley company, and he asks the audience, "How many of you have something you need to be doing right now?" And almost everybody raised their hand. And he said, "The human mind can only keep three to five things in mind before it starts losing stuff." So, if you write it down, and then put it in your to-do list to do

after David Allen's seminar, then your mind is free just to think about what's going on *now*. You don't have to worry, because it will come to you after the workshop.

So I find that to be very helpful and I want to talk to you now a little bit about the benefits of doing this. Being diligent about things – which is what this is about – pays off in physical benefits. Let's look at a scripture. It's in Proverbs 27:23 and 24. It says:

Proverbs 27:23-24 – *Know well the condition of your flocks, and give attention to your herds.* What are your flocks? It might be your flock of kids, or it might be the volunteer work you do, the job you go to, the obligations you've signed up for. These are all your responsibilities – your flocks – your stuff that you have to do. And it says the reason we do this is *for riches do not last forever, and does a crown endure to all generations?*

So what's this saying? Well, it's saying that we have to keep up with what's going on, because things change. Our financial situation changes, plans change, needs change, and God is telling us, "It's good to stay tuned to the changes in our lives, to our situations – whatever our situations – and our relationships – to be on top of things, to stay connected with what's happening – and not to let things slide away or become unimportant. Because just knowing human nature, if you have a role that you're playing and goals in that role, those things will slide down the list and take second place to the really important things, like telling people what you had for breakfast this morning on Facebook. Do you realize what a huge time-waster stuff like that is? It baffles my mind. You know, I signed up for Facebook – I thought, "Everybody's doing it" – and when I realized what it was, I thought, "You've got to be kidding me! I have stuff to do!" So stay on top of things. In that way, you'll be able to focus on the things that are important.

Let's look at another scripture. Diligence also helps us stay focused on God. In Hebrews 6:9, Paul kind of reamed out the Hebrews earlier in this letter – in chapter 5, he was pretty brutal – and he says in verse 9 of chapter 6:

Hebrews 6:9-13 – *Though we speak in this way –* this brutal way – *yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things – things that belong to salvation. For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for His name in serving the saints, as you still do. And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness –* that word is translated *diligence* in other translations, but *earnestness* is a good word – *to show the same diligence –* or *earnestness – to have the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those, who through faith and patience, inherit the promises. For when God made a promise to Abraham, since He had no one greater by whom to swear, He swore by Himself….*

So I see the word *diligence* and *sluggish* here. Paul is telling us here that we need to stay focused on what's important – to stay on top of it, to continue doing good works. You'll recall that in the first three parts of this series, we emphasized the need to take the longer view of our calling in our life, and the gift that God gives us in the roles that we play and the goals that He sets before

us. I don't think the word *goal* was used much in the Bible, but there *is* a word that they use in the Bible quite a bit. And it means the same thing. We can read about it in Hebrews 6. We've actually already heard in Hebrews 6 earlier. But He says in verse 17:

V-17-20 – *So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of His purpose, He guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we, who have fled for refuge, might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.* You could, just as well, put *the goal* set before us. We have hope of being God's family – Kingdom – as eternal beings. And he said: *We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain* – into the inner sanctum of God's temple – *where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*

So He wants us to hang in there with it – to *earnestly* follow, and be encouraged to follow, the hope – the goal – that He has set before us – that He's offered us – and to realize that Jesus has already accomplished all of that. So our hope of salvation is our goal. Our roles express our efforts toward that hope in this life. And we need to be zealous to be Christ-like in the roles that we're given to perform.

In today's world, the crush of things that we have to do can cover that over – absolutely bury it – take it out of our sight – but, if we know how to manage all the stuff, there will always be time to do the important things.

Now, I plan to put a link a picture of the stuff flow work on the LifeResource Website. And you can find the link and download the picture. And I'm going to have that located somewhere below the *Play* button for the presentation. In fact, hopefully, you even found it before you heard this and could see it as we went through it. It's very much more helpful if you have it to look at. You know, maybe you're not the kind of person that's convinced about doing this. Well, just buy a small notebook and start writing down what you want to do today, and it will expand from there.

Until next time, this is Bill Jacobs for LifeResource Ministries, serving children, families and the Church of God.