
JUST LOVE.

Just Love Guide to Time Management,
Organisation and Getting Stuff Done

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Just Love Guide to Time, Organisation and Getting Stuff Done: Introduction

One of the most regular requests for prayer that we, as a staff team, get from our students is around the area of time management. Whether it's struggling with busyness or work-life balance, procrastination or over-commitment, it seems that many Christian students are not being trained in what a biblical relationship with time looks like, and how that plays out in the way they get stuff done.

We're writing this in the context of Just Love groups, but learning how to relate well to time, how to be organised, and how to get stuff done are vital skills that will have an impact in pretty much every area of our lives.

How to use this guide

There are two options here. This has been written as a relatively thorough overview that covers most of the basics of effective organisation. That means that it is quite long, and that there is lots to implement. So, the first option is to take time, maybe a day or two during the holidays, to read through the whole guide, to reflect on each section and to implement all of the rhythms and tools suggested. Doing this will ensure that this guide the maximum impact for your own personal organisation.

It might be, however, that you are reading this swamped in the middle of term without the time or headspace to absorb everything in this guide. We want there to be some easy wins available – things that are relatively straight-forward to implement that will make a real difference to your personal organisation. We have created a summary section at the end which ought to take about five minutes to read and outlines the absolute essentials. If you're pushed for time, that's a good place to start.

Why does this matter?

There are all sorts of reasons why training ourselves to be effective with the time that God has given to us is really important. We'll unpack many of those in the general principles section below, but we want to start by casting a bit of a vision for this resource.

1 Corinthians 15 is Paul's masterpiece on resurrection – he lays out in glorious detail the future hope that we have of bodily resurrection in the new creation. And then, right at the end of the chapter he says 'therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' This is a good place to begin any reflection on getting stuff done. All of the work that we do for the Lord – the extraordinary and the mundane – is charged with energy and purpose because of the hope that we have in Jesus of resurrection.

Learning effective time management is fundamentally about love. We hugely increase our capacity to love people when we are focussed, productive and clear; and we diminish our capacity to love people when we are ineffective, over-stretched or over-worked.

For leaders, stewarding the time that God has given us well is also a matter of integrity. If we want to lead teams that get stuff done, that love people well, that seek to improve, and that live within the limits of being human, then we need to model the kind of effective time management that will enable our teams to fulfil the potential they have.

Growing in effective time management is largely about self-leadership – taking responsibility for your own development. Some people might find organisation more natural, but like any habit, it can be learned with practice. Even if you are very cynical about whether you will ever be able to master personal organisation, there are small and simple steps that you can take that will have a significant impact. We'll highlight these simple steps throughout the resource and summarise them in Part 3. The aim of learning effective systems of time management is not to reduce or eliminate spontaneity. Rather, as Scott Belsky, the founder of *Behance* – a network of the world's leading creative professionals, puts it, organising your time effectively will enable more space for creativity, and crucially will enable you to 'make ideas happen.'¹ You can use routine and rhythms to block out time for creative work. Putting in the effort required to learn effective rhythms for time management will grow rather than diminish your creativity, it will free you from the stress of undone tasks, and it will enable you to prioritise what matters most.

The Structure

There are three sections to this resource. The first outlines a few general principles around how we, as Jesus-followers, relate to time. The second outlines more of the practical side to getting stuff done effectively. These two sections work together – think of them as foundations and a building. Without the foundations – the underlying theology – the building is going to be pretty flimsy. And without the building – the actual practice of getting stuff done – the foundations will be fairly useless.

The third section is a five-minute summary of the whole guide, which could either be used as a recap, or as a starting point if you don't have time to read the whole thing.

Part 1: General Principles

¹ Scott Belsky, *Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision and Reality* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2010), 1-4

Time

Time is a **gift from God**. Jesus did not bend the limitations of time, he inhabited time and place – but time, for Jesus, was something that has a fulfilment. That fulfilment is the new creation – the new heavens and the new earth when Jesus comes again. The knowledge that time has an end influences our relationship with time in the present, not, Eugene Peterson suggests, 'by diminishing or denigrating it, but by charging it, filling it with purpose and significance.'² Because it is a gift, and because God's ultimate future charges the present with purpose, time really matters. How we relate to the gift of time, what we do with the time God has graciously given us, is really important.

Work

Work is a good thing. In the creation narrative right at the start of the bible, God is a worker. When we work, we reflect the character of our creator God.³ Hard work is not sinful in itself. In fact, hard work is frequently commended in the bible – Paul exhorts his congregations to be zealous in good works, not to tire in doing good, and to devote themselves to doing good.⁴ Hard work can be a good thing. But Paul is very clear that while work is important, it is only *so* important. In Ephesians 2 Paul talks about how we are saved by grace through faith *in order* to do good works. That order is vital: grace, faith, good works. **We work from salvation, not for it.** We work from peace, not for it. We work, not to gain status, but with the status of adopted sons and daughters of the almighty God.⁵ When we get the order right, hard work can be life-giving and God-glorifying. But when we lose this perspective, and get the order wrong, hard work can become dangerous. Work is a good thing – we are created to work – but very easily work can become an idol.

Reflection: what attitude towards work have your family and friends modelled to you? How has this impacted your attitude towards work? Do you tend more towards idolising hard work or being suspicious of anything that looks like hard work?

Rest

This understanding of work goes hand-in-hand with a biblical understanding of rest. Just as we ground our theology of work in the fact that we serve a God who works, we ground our theology of rest in the fact that we serve a God who rests. The logic of the sabbath in the Old Testament is rooted in God's rest on the seventh day in the creation narrative.⁶ And sabbath is the key to understanding the importance of rest.

² Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2005), 67

³ Matt Perman, *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Work Done* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 63

⁴ Titus 2:14; Galatians 6:9; Titus 3:8, 14

⁵ Emma Ineson, *Busy Christian Living: Blessing Not Burden* (London: Continuum, 2007)

⁶ Exodus 20:8-11

A vital thing to understand about the principle of sabbath is that it is not simply about resting in order to do better work. You can make very good pragmatic arguments about the importance of rest and self-care – rest certainly does help us to focus and to work well. But that’s not really the point of sabbath. Sabbath rest is fundamentally not about us. Most of us probably lean towards what Tim Chester describes as a **work-centred ethic** or a **leisure-centred ethic**.

- With a work-centred ethic, you **rest in order to work** – rest is simply a necessity enabling you to work better.
- With a leisure-centred ethic, you **work in order to rest** – work is a necessary evil that you just have to put up with in order to fund your leisure time.⁷

From a sabbath perspective, both are wrong. As Peterson puts it ‘sabbath is not primarily about us or how it benefits us. It is about God and how God forms us.’⁸ So, **sabbath is not about enabling better work**. That may be a side product, but it not the point.

Reflection: do you lean more towards a work-centred ethic or a leisure centred ethic? How might the God-centred ethic of sabbath challenge that?

Sabbath puts work in its right place. It reminds us that God, and not our work, is where our allegiance lies. It reminds us that time is a gift to be received not a commodity to exploit. And it reminds us that we are not indispensable – the act of not working can keep in check our humility – reminding us that the hope of the world is Jesus, not us. The Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, talks about Sabbath ‘as resistance.’ For him, the Sabbath principle was introduced as an alternative to the exploitative economy of Egypt. In Egypt, the Hebrew people had no rest – they were forced to work as slaves in a system of greed, production and consumption.⁹ The Sabbath command was as ‘a festival of freedom’ where these liberated slaves resisted the values of Egypt, and testified to God’s alternative values of freedom, restfulness and compassion for neighbour.¹⁰ Throughout the Old Testament, with the refrain ‘remember that I am the God who brought you out of Egypt’, God instructed his people to live alternatively – not to go back to the ways of Egypt.

Brueggemann’s thoughts are particularly helpful for us when it comes to thinking about how this principle of Sabbath translates into our practice of rest. **We live in a culture of anxiety, in which our worth, our status and our security are never quite certain.** And so, we are taught, we need to hustle – we need to keep on working relentlessly to stay ahead of the game. This kind of anxiety turns neighbours into competitors. This is not so different, Brueggemann suggests, from the Egyptian context which the Sabbath was established to resist.¹¹

So, there is a need for us, in a culture that so often celebrates the antithesis of sabbath – relentless production, consumption and greed – to recover the peculiarity of our story. Just as the Sabbath command flows into the commands of neighbour love, and just as the sabbath laws flow into the laws

⁷ Tim Chester, *The Busy Christian’s Guide to Busyness* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006), 30

⁸ Peterson, *Christ Plays*, 116

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2017), 2-6, 18

¹⁰ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 21, 43

¹¹ Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 20-33

of release and jubilee, our pursuit of justice must flow from rest.¹² **We must live into the peculiar alternative of sabbath rest.**

What does that actually look like for us? A few tips:

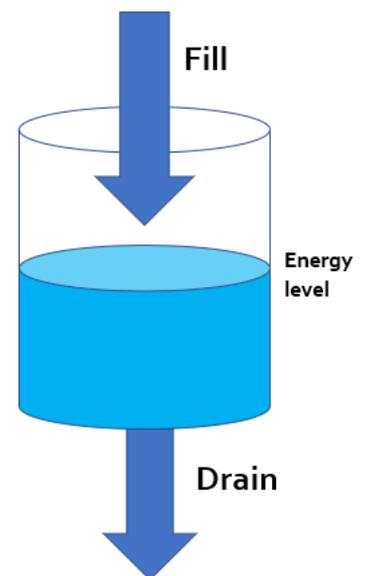
- 1) *Take a day a week as a sabbath.* It doesn't necessarily have to be a Sunday, though that can often be the most sensible day to take. Resisting the culture of anxious hustling means saying no to work. For us that will mean academic work, but it also ought to include Just Love stuff. **Our Just Love work is no less in need of a Sabbath to remind us that God is in control, and we are not.** Sabbath doesn't mean doing nothing at all – Jesus pushes against overly legalistic understandings of sabbath that missed the point that sabbath is about doing things which give us life, which **realign us with who we are created to be.**¹³ It's about recreation in the full (re-creation) sense of the word. This might be reading, going for walks, praying, eating with friends. It will look different for all of us.

- 2) *Keep your buckets full.* Grounded in sabbath, we can then consider the balance of work and rest in our lives. A nice analogy here is to think of your energy as a bucket. Most activities require more energy than we get out of doing them – they drain your energy level, like holes in the bucket. These draining activities won't necessarily be bad or unpleasant. It's likely that working on your degree and doing regular local volunteering will require you to put in more energy than you are getting out. Hopefully you still really enjoy doing these. You just need to know that they will, to some extent, deplete your energy levels. They are not rest.

Other activities fill your bucket. The best filling activities will be whatever the good quality, re-creation rest that we mentioned above looks like for you.

It's also likely that some activities will be somewhere in the middle – they will have some draining and some filling qualities. For example, a late-night worship session may really invigorate your faith, but it may also leave you physically exhausted.

As you learn in growing detail which activities fill and drain your bucket, you can **manage your time to ensure that the bucket stays full.** If for example, you have an intense week of work coming up with lots of activities that will drain your energy, then increase the amount of activities that will fill your bucket, so that your energy is not depleted too much. This can be a little counter-intuitive. **When we are busy, often the first things that we cut are those things that fill us up. Don't.** That might be fine in a short burst, but a prolonged period where we are draining more than we are filling is dangerous. So, let's learn to keep our buckets full.¹⁴



¹² Note, Exodus 20, how the sabbath as the fourth commandment is the bridge between the first three commands, which concern God, to the final six commands, which concern neighbour. And note how the principal of sabbath spills into concern for neighbour in the form of the sabbath year (Exodus 23:10-13) and the year of jubilee (Leviticus 25)

¹³ See, for example, Luke 6, 13 and 14

¹⁴ Bill Hybels, *Simplify: Ten Practices to Unclutter Your Soul* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2015), 17-26

Reflection: Write out all of the activities you do in an average week – going to lectures, seeing friends, cooking – everything you can think of – and sort them all into things that drain your energy, things that fill your energy, and things that fall somewhere in between. Take a look at the spread – what might it teach you?

- 3) *Rest before you work.* This is quite simple and pragmatic. Sports scientists tell us that if an athlete waits until they are thirsty before they take a drink, it's too late, because their body will already be slightly dehydrated, and their performance will dip.¹⁵ The same is true of rest. **We can so easily be tempted to binge-rest** – waiting until we are exhausted and the work is done and then crashing. But the sabbath principle resists that. It is a good habit to get into to work from rest. That means that rest comes first. This impacts how we view sleep. It might be helpful for many of us to see sleep not as the end of the day, but as the start of the day ahead. That can help us to plan when we go to bed based on when we need to get up, ensuring that we get a healthy amount of sleep.
- 4) *Play.* This is something that we especially make room for on a sabbath day, but it can also spill out into every day of the week. For those of us who can tend towards an activist mentality, we need to be reminded that it is ok to have fun. More than that, **it is good to have fun!** Taking time to play – to have fun – to do things that serve no purpose other than filling you and others with joy – is another way to resist the drive toward relentless and anxious productivity.

Busyness

We've established that being busy and working hard are not bad things – they can often be very good things – enabling us best to serve others and glorify God. But we've also established that we live in a culture of anxiety that expects us to hustle – to work frantically to out-compete each other. In that culture, busyness so easily becomes an identity rather than a circumstance. That sort of un-sabbathed, frantic busyness is an abuse of the gift of time – seeing time as something to exploit rather than inhabit, something to fight rather than enjoy. So, although there is nothing wrong with being busy, and doing a lot of things, in our working and in our resting, we can offer a beautiful alternative to the frantic, anxious hustling of our culture.

Procrastination

If anxious busyness is one abuse of the gift of time, then procrastination is the equal but opposite abuse. It is important to distinguish rest from procrastination. Rest is a good thing. Procrastination isn't. Procrastination is distraction from work, but it is bad quality rest. We're all prone to different sorts of procrastination, but many of us are particularly vulnerable to things like social media, aimless web browsing, and sometimes just conversations that ought to wait for another time. The point isn't that those things are particularly bad in themselves. The issue comes when they are distractions from work that we ought to be doing. They can also be distractions from good quality rest – for example when you

¹⁵ Wayne Cordeiro, *Leading on Empty: Refilling Your Tank and Renewing Your Passion* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House, 2009), 124

want to go out for a peaceful walk to meet a friend but end up having to rush because you couldn't stop scrolling through your newsfeed when it was time to go.

We tend to be most vulnerable to procrastination when we are tired and when work is difficult.

That means that there are a few really simple things that we can do to help counter procrastinating:

- 1) *Rest well.* It is far easier to focus on work and not get distracted when we're working from a place of rest.
- 2) *Break down big tasks.* Often, we can be vulnerable to procrastinating when we are faced with a big, daunting task and don't know where to begin. Practice breaking those big tasks into bitesize chunks and made sure that you know what the next action is.
- 3) *Keep vision high.* We can often struggle to motivate ourselves to do tasks that seem a bit dull. When motivation is low, procrastination will be far easier. So, the key is to keep focused on the vision of what you are doing – the end goal – and to link this dull task to that vision. In a Just Love context, you'll probably be far more motivated to create a spreadsheet, or write an email, or book a venue if you keep it connecting to the vision of inspiring and releasing every Christian student to pursue the biblical call to social justice.
- 4) *Procrastinate positively.* If you are struggling to focus on a task and find yourself drifting into procrastination, you can still choose to procrastinate positively. You could use it as an opportunity for some fun, you could pray or meditate, you could do some quick exercise, you could make a cup of tea – all of which are (usually) more positive and less addictive than scrolling through social media and they mean that you can return to work with renewed focus. You could even try doing absolutely nothing – the boredom will likely help you to focus back on work and it can be good thinking time.
- 5) *Get accountable.* If you know that procrastination is something that you really struggle with then getting someone to lovingly hold you accountable on it can be very helpful.

Reflection: What forms of procrastination are you most vulnerable to? What are you going to do about it?

Sustainability

Another principle that's helpful to establish is sustainability. In our teens and twenties, many of us can get away with pulling the occasional all-nighter or filling our days with activity after activity. But those sorts of habits will become increasingly harder as we get older. We want Just Love to be equipping students for a lifelong pursuit of Jesus and justice. That means that it is a marathon, not a sprint, and that **learning a pace of life that is sustainable over the long-haul, is vitally important.**

Think of the rev counter on a car. It has the red-zone, which the dial goes into when you are pushing the engine to the limits. Very occasionally it's necessary to go into the red zone – but if you stay there permanently you will damage the engine. Similarly, for us, **sometimes circumstances will push us into the red-zone, but we cannot stay there.** That's when burnout happens, and nobody wins when we burnout. We have



to learn a pace of life that will mean that we, like St Paul can look back and say that we fought the good fight, that we finished the race, that we kept the faith.¹⁶

The Gift of Limits

One key to getting stuff done without anxiety and stress is to accept that we are human. Much of our anxious busyness is a symptom of us trying to be God, trying to be in control, trying to do more than we can sustainably do. No time-management system can solve that – **no technique will give us more than 24 hours in a day, no training or app will make us super-human.** Zach Eswine’s book *Sensing Jesus* outlines what he calls the gift of limits – the idea that the limits inherent in being human are not bad things that we should try to transcend, but they are gifts. **We do not glorify God by trying to become God.**¹⁷ So any efforts we make to grow in time management and getting stuff done must start by accepting the gift of limits – by recognising that we are human and limited and that that is ok.

Reflection: Can you think of times when you have been most tempted to attempt to transcend the limits of being human? What might accepting the gift of limits look like in those contexts?

Urgency vs. Importance

This grid, used by Covey, Merrill and Merrill, is really helpful.¹⁸

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Quadrant 1	Quadrant 2
Not Important	Quadrant 3	Quadrant 4

Everything that we do - in work and in general life – will fit into one of these quadrants.

Quadrant 1 – Urgent and Important – the Quadrant of Crisis

These are crises that need immediate attention. Maybe a deadline tomorrow, or a friend who needs to be rushed to hospital, or an important meeting that we need to attend.

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 4:7

¹⁷ Zach Eswine, *Sensing Jesus: Lie and Ministry as a Human Being* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 20-4, 40

¹⁸ Stephen R. Covey, A Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First: Coping With the Ever-Increasing Demands of the Workplace* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 36-9

We have to spend time in Quadrant 1 – there will always be things that are urgent and important that come up. Sometimes this will be out of our control. Sometimes it will be because we don't do enough planning to prevent crises.

Quadrant 2 – Important but Not Urgent – The Quadrant of Quality

This is where we do all of the long-term, big-picture things, like clarifying purpose and vision, planning, developing younger leaders and personal development – as well as rhythms of good rest, fun, time with God and time with friends and family.

These are the most important things, but because they are rarely urgent, we can always be tempted to neglect them. **When we neglect Quadrant 2, what ends up happening is that Quadrant 1 grows** – we end up with more important and urgent crises because we didn't do the planning we should have done, or because we didn't prioritise a relationship, or because we didn't take care of our health. That is a recipe for anxiety and frantic busyness – we become slaves to urgency – moving from crisis to crisis and our health and relationships will suffer.

Conversely, spending more time in Quadrant 2 will reduce the time we need to spend in Quadrant 1 because it will prevent a lot of things from reaching the urgent and important level.

Crucially, this quadrant will not just take care of itself. We have to carve out time in our schedule to prioritise the things that are important but not urgent – to put first things first.

Quadrant 3 – Urgent but Not Important – The Quadrant of Deception

Sometimes it can be hard to decide if a task belongs in Quadrant 1 or 3. We might be presented with a phone call, a friend might invite us over, or we might be asked last minute to help out at an event. The challenge, in these urgent situations, is to decide if a task is truly important or not. Too often we can spend an awful lot of our time in Quadrant 3 doing things that aren't really important trying to meet other people's expectations of us, and it means that we neglect the important but not urgent tasks of Quadrant 2.

In Section 2, we will look at the process for deciding on what is important – deciding what's best next – by being clear on our purpose, values, vision, roles and goals.

Quadrant 4 – Not Important and Not Urgent – The Quadrant of Procrastination

We really shouldn't spend any time in this quadrant. It is a waste of time – tasks that are neither urgent nor important do not glorify God and do not serve others. Remember that procrastination is different from rest. Rest is firmly in Quadrant 2 – doing things which fill up our energy buckets is vitally important. But when we procrastinate, we are neither working nor resting. We can often go to these sorts of tasks as a form of escapism – when we're feeling anxious or frantically busy then procrastination – getting ourselves addicted to trashy TV, or gaming, or trawling through social media – can be really tempting. But it only exacerbates the problem. **Spending time in Quadrant 4 decreases our capacity to spend time doing the important things in Quadrant 2, and it increases the size of Quadrant 1** – meaning that we become more frantic and more stressed.

Quadrant 4 is not your friend.

The key take-away here is that **many of us live lives that are dictated by what is urgent**. That means that we are frantic, restless and anxious. And it means that we neglect the most important things in life

– our discipleship and our relationships – and it shackles the extent to which we are able to love and serve others.

But **another way is possible** – a way in which we put first things first, where our calendars are dictated by what is important not what is urgent, where we are able to glorify God and serve others with joy and freedom and love.

Reflection: draw out the grid and fill in out with your activities for the last week. How is the spread? What was in Quadrant 3 that you should have said 'no' to? What do you wish had been in Quadrant 2? If there was anything in Quadrant 4, what do you need to do to eliminate it?

What's best next?

This is the title of Matt Perman's blog and book on gospel-driven productivity, and it is the question right at the heart of effective time management.¹⁹ When we accept the gift of limits, we accept that we cannot be in complete control, and that we cannot do all of the really good, urgent things that we could spend our time doing. Opportunity does not equal obligation. That means that we have to make choices. We have to decide what's most important. That's why **effectiveness and not efficiency is our aim**. Much of what is written about time management is aimed at making more efficient use of time - doing more things and doing them faster. Efficiency is fine but being efficient is not much good if we are not doing the right things. So, before we think about techniques that help us to be efficient, we need first to address the area of effectiveness – and in particular making decisions about what our priorities are – what do we say 'yes' to and what do we say 'no' to?²⁰

We are limited. We need to make those decisions about what to do and what not to do – **we need to say no to the urgent but not important tasks of Quadrant 3 so that we can say yes to the important but not urgent tasks of Quadrant 2**. That means that we will let people down, but the good news, Shauna Niequist points out, is that 'you get to decide who you're going to disappoint, who you're going to say no to.'²¹ And those are decisions that we can only make when we are clear on the principles that we have gone through above, and when we have a clear understanding of our purpose, values, vision, goals, and roles. In part two, we'll now turn our attention to those.

¹⁹ Perman, *What's Best Next*

²⁰ Ineson, *Busy Christian Living*, 13, 193; Perman *What's Best Next*, 13

²¹ Shauna Niequist, *Present Over Perfect: leaving behind frantic for a simpler, more soulful way of living* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 53

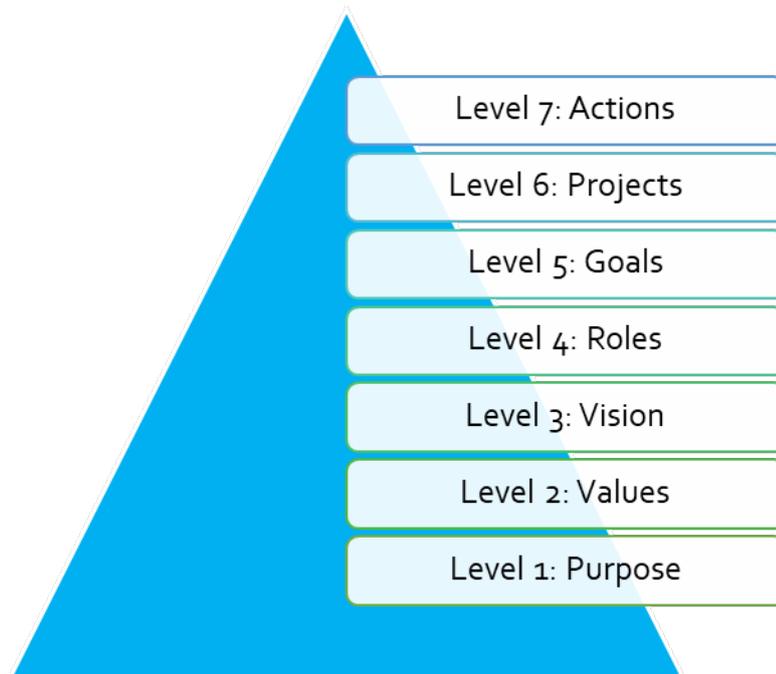
Part 2: Implementation

Part 1 has laid out some of the key principles around how we relate to time, in part 2 we will focus on how the rubber hits the road – how do we live out those principles in the day to day of organisation and effectiveness, and how do we decide to do what's best next?

The Seven Levels

In part 1 we identified that one of the keys to effective time management is learning to put first things first – to prioritise the things that matter most. But how do we do that? When we're presented with all sorts of things that are demanding our time, **how do we decide on what is important and what isn't?**

One helpful tool for this is *the seven levels*. This is a loose adaptation of the systems used by Perman and Allen.²² Imagine a building with seven floors. Each floor builds on the one and informs the one above. In order to be effective and prioritise the most important tasks at the top levels of projects and actions, it helps to be clear on the lower levels of purpose, values, vision, roles and goals. This may sound like a lot of effort, but making use of some of the support systems we suggest below will enable it to quickly become second nature.



²² Perman, *What's Best Next*, 138; David Allen, *Getting Things Done: the art of stress-free productivity*, revised edition (London: Piatkus, 2015), 55-7

Level 1: Purpose

What is your life purpose? Some of us may have a very clear sense of calling – of God giving us a specific vocation to pursue. For all of us who follow Jesus, we could summarise our purpose as something like ‘glorifying God and serving others.’ How that works itself out will differ for each of us but, as a primary calling, we all share that call to follow Jesus. Being clear of that really matters.

So, the first question to ask when deciding on priorities is: *what will glorify God and serve others?*

Level 2: Values

Some of us may have a really clear set of values, others may have never thought about it. What are the principles that you particularly value? Make sure that those values are rooted in the bible, and talk them through with others. At Just Love our core values are living like Christ, relationships, student ownership and quality. These values help to define the way we do all that we do. Similarly, on an individual level, what are the particular values that you want to embody? If you are clear on what you value, that can help you to make decisions in line with those values.

So, the second question to ask when deciding on priorities is: *what will fit with my values?*

Level 3: Vision

Vision is the destination that you are journeying towards. Once you are clear on your purpose and values, these will help you to set clear vision for different areas of your life. What could be and should be, but currently is not?

So, the third question to ask when deciding on priorities is: *what is in line with my vision?*

Level 4: Roles

What are the areas of responsibility in your life? There will always be many more good things that you could spend time doing than you actually have time to do, so it is good to be clear on the things that you are actually responsible for. Draw out a role map. What are the things that you are actually responsible for? The commitments you’ve made? The things that no one else is going to do for you?

This is an imaginary Role Map for the local coordinator of a Just Love group. You might have different categories than in the illustration, but this ought to be a helpful model:

Role Map for Life						
Personal	Family	House	Church	Social	Just Love	Academic
Spiritual health Physical health Emotional health Character Organisation Learning Rest Fun	Parents Brother Cousins Grandparents	Paying rent Housemates Cleaning Cooking	Small group Kids’ work	Friendships Neighbours Sports team	Managing local volunteering Maintaining relationships with key charities Collecting volunteer hour data	Lectures Seminars Assignments Reading Essays Revision Exams

If you are clear on what your roles and responsibilities are, then you can also be clear on what is **not** your role, or your responsibility. Sometimes things will come up outside of these roles that you have to

do – for example, if you are covering on a church rota for a friend who is ill – but in general, if you have committed to a certain set of roles, it will be necessary to say 'no' to things that do not fall within those roles in order to fulfil those roles well.

This role map can also be helpful if you feel over-committed – it can help you to see all of your responsibilities and make the hard decision to cut back on some of them. Better still, don't allow yourself to end up in a place where you need to cut down on your roles by being careful what you commit to in the first place.

The fourth question to ask when deciding on priorities is: *what is my responsibility?*

Level 5: Goals

The fifth level is around goals. It can be really helpful to set yourself development goals in different areas of your life. You might set these termly, biannually, or annually – it doesn't matter too much as long as the goals are SMART (specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, and time-bound).

Having clear short-term goals can help you to channel your energy toward specific areas. If you are the secretary of your Just Love committee and you set yourself a goal around growing your confidence chairing meetings, then it makes a lot of sense for you to prioritise learning about meetings rather than learning about an unrelated topic.

When you set goals they will only be useful if they are at the front of your mind – so make sure that they are visible somewhere and be sure to review your goals as part of your weekly review (see below).

The fifth question to ask when deciding on priorities is: *what will help me to meet the goals I have set?*

Action: Take some time – a whole day if you can spare it, although a few hours will still have a huge impact – to prayerfully work your way through levels 1-5. Clarity at these five levels will make the challenge of deciding what's best next so much smoother in the day-to-day.

Levels 1-5 can seem really daunting at first. The thought of working your way through all of those different levels with every decision about what's best next can seem impossibly tiring. But in reality, if you are clear on Levels 1-5, most of the time you don't need to refer to them. They remain there – at the back of your mind – but you'll get into the habit of being able to sort out the important tasks from the not important tasks without walking through each one level by level. If you are ever unsure whether a task is important, then you can walk through level by level, and in the space of about thirty seconds you can usually be confident about how important it is. The more you do this, the quicker and more accurate it gets.

Levels 6 and 7 are where the rubber hits the road – projects and actions – they are the nitty gritty of getting stuff done. Most people leap straight to levels 6 and 7, neglecting the first five levels. But projects and actions are far simpler and more effective when they are built on the foundations of levels 1-5.

Level 6: Projects

Projects are essentially large tasks – tasks that require numerous actions. A project could be writing an essay, being part of a band or training for a 10k. In a Just Love context it could be things like mobilising volunteers for a local project, putting on an event, or evaluating the term.

It is a good idea to have an inventory where you write all of your projects. You may be surprised by just how many you have on the go at once.

You can use an app like Evernote for this – create a folder called 'Projects List' and then create a page for each project that you are currently working on. Or, if you prefer, a physical notebook can work just as well. You can use these project pages to plan out each project, and work out what the next actions are.

Make sure that your project list is kept up to date. Part of your weekly review (see below) will be skimming through your project list, removing complete projects and gathering next actions.

Level 7: Actions

The final level of personal organisation is action. We can often be tempted to go straight in at level 7 – when there are lots of urgent things on your mind it can be easy to just charge into one thing after another. But, as we have already covered, that sort of urgency-driven anxiety is not effective – it will only hurt us and hurt others.

Moving up through the building, through the first 6 levels, will enable our actions to be the best actions – it will enable us to focus on what's most important.

In the same app or notebook that you have your projects list, have a next action section, where you can keep a live list of what actions need to be completed.

Action: Take an hour or two to set up a Projects List folder and a Next Actions list in either a notebook or an app.

Support Tools

No technique or tool is going to single-handedly transform our personal organisation. But, once we get to the levels of projects and actions, there are loads of books written and whole systems designed to help us get stuff done (we recommend a few at the end). We've put together what we think are the most basic and most effective rhythms which when implemented will have a huge impact on your time management.

The different tools rely on each other, so it is best to introduce all of them at once. If that feels too daunting though, why not aim to build gradually? **The best tools to start with would be capture, calendar and the weekly review.**

Capture

This is an idea coined by David Allen in his book *Getting Things Done*. The principle is very simple, and it revolves around the idea of 'open loops'. Open loops are any tasks that we should do, could do, or might do – but which remain in the mind. Imagine you think *I must get my mum a birthday card*, or, *I could arrange to meet with that person*. They are open loops, and they remain open loops until we close them. We close those loops by *capturing* them – which is very simply using a system outside of our heads to store that information. That system might be a notebook, or an app on our phone. It doesn't

really matter as long as it is easy to use and accessible all the time, so that the moment a thought comes into your head you can capture it and close the loop.

Open loops are a huge cause of ineffective time-management. We easily forget things when they are only in our mind, and because having hundreds of open loops buzzing around our head is incredibly distracting. It makes focusing on any task in the present very difficult. It is very easy to get distracted.

Allen uses a helpful analogy. Our conscious mind is a bit like RAM on a computer – it has a limited capacity. There is only so much stuff that you can store and still have your brain function at a high level. Most people, Allen says, 'walk around with their RAM bursting at the seams.'²³

So, you need to set up a capture bucket. Experiment a bit, find a tool you like to use, and whenever an open loop comes into your head, close it by storing it in your capture bucket and out of your head.

For a capture bucket to work, it has to be emptied regularly. As a minimum, this should happen once a week during your weekly review (see below).

Organisation System

We've already recommending using an app like Evernote, or a simple notebook to keep track of your projects and next actions. It makes sense to have all your personal organisational system spread out over as few media as possible – ideally just one.

Whether it's an app or a notebook, we'd recommend that you have five components. This may sound more complicated than a simple to-do list, and it is, but the problem with to-do lists is that they either miss things, or they become too long and difficult to prioritise what's best next. Having a system with these five distinct components should make organisation much simpler and more effective:

- Next Actions
- Project List
- Capture Bucker
- Backburner
- Reference Material

We've already covered Next Actions, Project List and Capture Bucket folders.

The Backburner is a place to store creative ideas that don't necessarily have any immediate actions, but which you want to regularly come back to. Perhaps that might be ideas of people you'd like to connect with, or books you'd like to read, or ideas for article you'd like to write one day.

The Reference Material Folder is just a place to store important information – perhaps links to interesting articles, notes on important meetings, or recipe ideas – that you might need to refer back to one day, but which you need do nothing about right now.

²³ Allen, *Getting Things Done*, 25

Plan the Day

It is good, either at the end or the beginning of your work day, to plan out the day ahead. Some people will flourish when this is done with great detail. Others will feel restricted by too much detail, but it is nevertheless really important to block out time and decide on the priorities for the day.

With practise, this daily planning can be sharp and fast. You can find an order that works well for you, but it's likely a good daily planning session will involve the following:

- Workflow (see below)
- Look at your calendar – what is scheduled for today? What prep is needed before any of the scheduled activities?
- Referring to your next actions list, what else will you do today? This will depend on the time that you have, the energy that you have and the priorities that you set at the start of the week.
- Decide on the most important task of the day and schedule that for when your energy levels will be at their peak (that will be a different time of day for different people)

Action: Write out what you need to cover in your daily planning session and make sure that it is always visible in the place where you do you planning.

Workflow

Workflow is about staying on top of work by processing all of your inputs (emails, messenger, Slack, capture bucket, etc) to zero. It tends to be far more effective to have one block of time to do this thoroughly each day rather than constantly checking messages over the day and interrupting other tasks to respond immediately. A rhythm of starting or ending each day with workflow will decrease the likelihood of messages slipping through the net and will increase the effectiveness of your work over the rest of the day because you will be less distracted.

When processing those inputs, go through each message in order, do one at a time, and never put anything back in the inbox un-actioned.²⁴ Ask the question, what is the next action? If there is no action necessary, great, you can move on, either adding the item to the Backburner or Reference Material or deleting it. If there *is* an action, then you either need to do it, delegate it, or defer it.²⁵

- *Do it.* If the action takes less than two minutes, for example, responding to a church leader to confirm a location for a meeting, then do it right then.

But if the next action will take more than two minutes, you need to either:

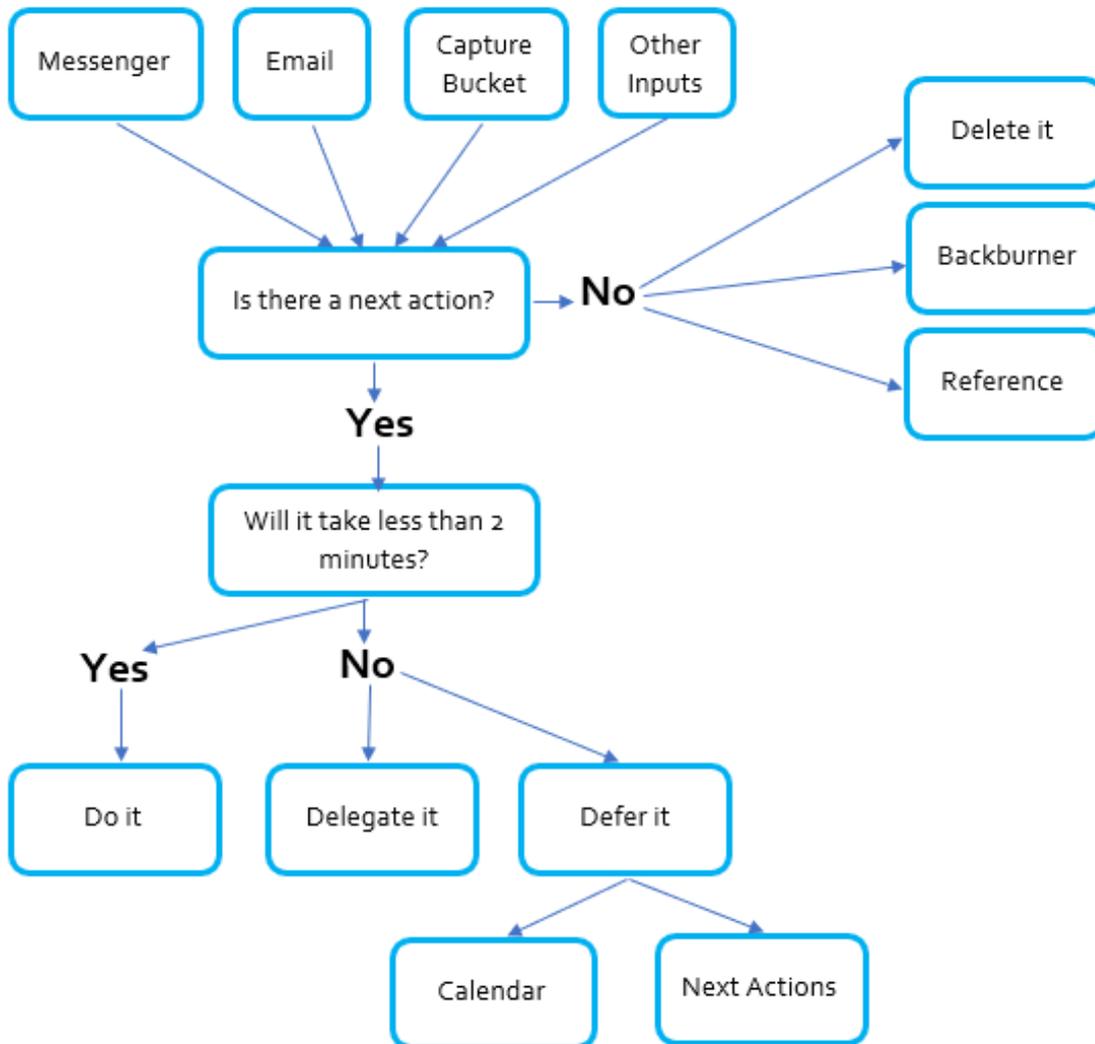
- *Delegate it.* If it is not really your role, or if it's an opportunity to give responsibility to a younger leader, then delegate the next action. Make sure that you are clear on what the task is and when it needs to be done by.
- *Defer it.* If it is your responsibility, then either schedule a time in your calendar for when you will do it or put it in the next actions list.

This diagram summarises the workflow process.²⁶

²⁴ Perman *What's Best Next*, 267

²⁵ Allen, *Getting Things Done*, 39

²⁶ Based on Allen, *Getting Things Done*, 37



Action: either copy this diagram, or write out your own version of it, and have it visible in the place where you do your daily planning.

Calendars

It is vital that you use a calendar, and not just use it, but learn to use it well. Routine tends to be far better than lists for getting stuff done.

Remember Covey, Merrill and Merrill's table:

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	Quadrant 1	Quadrant 2
Not Important	Quadrant 3	Quadrant 4

Quadrant 2 – the Important but Not Urgent tasks is the easiest quadrant to neglect, but if we neglect those things – like self-care, and planning, and relationships – then we become slaves to frantic urgency, and our relationships, health and discipleship will suffer.

The way that we ensure that our work is effective, that we are doing the best things, not just the most urgent things, it by **scheduling our priorities**. This applies both to our work and our rest. If you are on committee, then schedule in your committee meetings, and it will mean that you don't double book yourself. If you know that spending time with a particular friend is a really important energy-bucket-filling activity, then schedule that in – block out time to spend with that friend so that it doesn't get squeezed out by other lower-priority things.

Both digital and physical calendars can work – it really depends on what you prefer – but decide on one and use it for everything rather than trying to juggle a number of different calendars.

So, use a calendar to schedule your priorities. And honour that calendar. If you're constantly shuffling things around and rescheduling things, it will be much harder to maintain a life-giving rhythm. As far as it is possible, if you write something in your calendar, honour it.²⁷

One final tip with using calendars well – don't aim to fill every single gap. You need some flexibility because things will inevitably come up unexpected, and some tasks will inevitably take longer than you anticipated. Aim to schedule at around 70% of your maximum capacity. This should give you room to manoeuvre.

Weekly Review

A weekly review is what will allow you to be proactive rather than reactive in how you live out of the gift of time.

To do this well, you'll need a regular 1-2 hour slot every week. It can seem counter-intuitive to carve out a big block of time from your schedule in the name of productivity, but it is more than worth it. In the world of work, this tends to work best on a Friday afternoon – as the last thing that you do before the weekend – enabling you to end the week really well and set up the week ahead. You can adapt it to best fit your weekly rhythm of work and rest. Given the nature of Uni life, it's probably best for this review to

²⁷ Allen, *Getting Things Done*, 45

cover everything – uni work, Just Love stuff and whatever else you're involved with. But if you find it easier then you could have two separate weekly reviews – one for academic stuff, and one for everything else.

This is a suggested layout for a weekly review:²⁸

- 1) Pray and thank God for the week
- 2) Reflect on purpose, values and vision. How did you do at living into them this week?
- 3) Get everything current
 - a. Do workflow
 - b. Look over your Next Actions and Projects lists – delete completed tasks and gather next actions for projects
- 4) Define the priorities for the week ahead
 - a. Reflect on your physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual health. How are you doing, and how do you need to structure next week accordingly? If your physical health is not great then maybe you need to build more rest into next week. If your spiritual health is not great, then maybe you need to structure in some additional devotional time.
 - b. Review roles and goals
 - c. Calendar – check the week gone by – are there any actions that have not been captured? Check the week ahead – what actions might be required?
 - d. Look over Next Actions list and identify the two or three most important tasks.
 - e. Get creative – look through the Backburner file – is there anything there that you want to prioritise during the week ahead?

Action: Personalise this list and make sure that it is visible wherever you like to do your weekly review

Workspace

The physical space you work in will impact your effectiveness and focus. Some of us might be more impacted by our work environment than others, but it is something for everyone to consider.

It might be that you tend to work in the library or in coffee shops – find places that allow you to best focus. The chances are that you will do at least some work in your room at your desk – and so it is worth giving some thought to how the desk is set out. Make sure that you have a good supply of basics like pens and note paper, and store them in a logical place.

If this really interests you, then Matt Perman goes into far more detail on his [blog](#).

Part 3: Five Minute Summary

²⁸ Perman *What's Best Next*, 258; Allen, *Getting Things Done*, 195-7

Time is a gift from God, and that means that how we relate to time really matters.

Both anxious busyness and procrastinations abuse the gift of time

Hard work is a good thing, but it can often become an idol. Very easily we can find ourselves frantically busy – hustling to stay ahead.

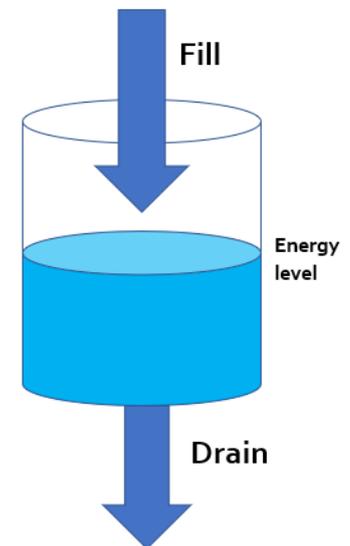
To avoid anxious busyness:

- Take a day a week as a sabbath – a day for rest and re-creation – a day for remembering that we do not serve a God of relentless work.
- Learn what gives you energy and what drains your energy and make sure that you balance the two.

Procrastination is neither work nor rest – it is a waste of time.

To avoid procrastination:

- Rest well. Tiredness makes us more vulnerable to unhelpful distraction from work.
- When big tasks feel daunting, break them down into manageable chunks.
- Do something positive when you are finding it hard to focus – pray, exercise, make a cup of tea.



We are not God. We do not glorify God by trying to be God

We cannot make more than twenty-four hours in a day. We are limited and that means that we will never be able to do all of the good things that we would like to do. That means that we have to decide what to prioritise. We have to say 'no' to good things for the sake of the 'best' things. The question to get really good at asking is 'what's best next?'

Prioritise what's important not what's urgent

Many of us are slaves to urgency – allowing circumstances to determine our schedule. The problem with that is that it traps us – it squeezes out the time we have to spend on the most important things – like devotional time, time with friends, personal development and exercise – and all sorts of damage happens when we neglect those things.

So, key to a finding a sustainable rhythm of life is to prioritise the things that are most important – guarding them – and not allowing your life to be dictated by things that are urgent but not very important.

To help work out what is important – what to prioritise – think about:

- What will best glorify God and serve others?
- What will best fit with your values?
- What are you responsible for?

Three essential tools for effective personal organisation

1) Capture tasks outside of your head

Use either a notebook or an app to capture any un-completed tasks that come into your head. Storing those thoughts outside of your head will mean that you don't forget them and will mean that you can focus on one task at a time.

Use an app or notebook that you really like to use, and make sure that you empty the list at least once a week in your weekly review.

2) Use and honour your calendar

Use a calendar – electronic or physical – to schedule your priorities. Block out rhythms of work and rest. Put in the important things and as far as possible don't compromise on them. Leave some space so that there is room to be flexible when unexpected things come up.

3) Do a Weekly Review

This is the cornerstone of effective personal organisation. Take 1-2 hours either at the start or at the end of every week to review the week gone by and plan the week ahead. A weekly review will look roughly like this:

- 1) Pray and thank God for the week
- 2) Reflect on your purpose, values and vision. How did you do at living into them this week?
- 3) Get everything current
 - a. Empty and process all of your emails, messages, capture list etc.
- 4) Define the priorities for the week ahead
 - a. Reflect on your physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual health. How are you doing, and how do you need to structure next week accordingly?
 - b. Calendar – check the week gone by – are there any actions that have not been captured? Check the week ahead – what actions might be required?
 - c. Write out all of the actions that need to happen next week and identify the two or three most important tasks.

Appendix

Suggested Reading

- Stephen R. Covey, A Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First: Coping with the Ever-Increasing Demands of the Workplace* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

A classic – especially good on the purpose, vision, values, roles and goals levels of personal organisation, and on the urgent vs important challenge

- David Allen, *Getting Things Done: the art of stress-free productivity, revised edition* (London: Piatkus, 2015)

Generally regarded as the best book for the project and action levels of personal organisation.

- Matt Perman, *What's Best Next: How the Gospel Transforms the Way You Get Work Done* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014)

The most compressive and thorough Christian guide to time management. Perman applies a lot of Covey and Allen's material from a gospel-centred perspective.

- Scott Belsky, *Making Ideas Happen: Overcoming the Obstacles Between Vision and Reality* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2010)

This book is written to help creative people turn ideas into action.