

The Myth of the Balanced Life

Deep within all of us is a quest to experience a healthy sustainable life: a life with deep friendships. A life with divine dialogue. A life that makes a difference. We've been exploring some of these themes in this series called *Quest*.

One of the things I hear a lot, as a pastor, is the frustration people have of trying to live life in balance. Work, home, church, self-care – how do we balance at all. The question is how to perfectly balance the sands of the hour-glass into this scale so that there isn't a tilt in any one direction.

The answer that most Christians and churches give is to sit people down and get people to identify their priorities. The thinking behind it all is that if you're life is out of balance, it must mean that your priorities are out of alignment. So, if we identify good priorities, you're life will be in balance again. Typically, a discussion on priorities, at least within church circles, would go something like this:

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| 1) <i>God</i> | 2) <i>Marriage</i> | 3) <i>Children</i> |
| 4) <i>Work</i> | 5) <i>Church</i> | 6) <i>Self...</i> |

Now, I'm a pastor so I guess I'm meant to subscribe to that – but the truth is that it has never helped me. In fact, it left me feeling guiltier and more frustrated. I could never see how to put that into action. What does it mean in practice?

Is it about time? If so, you assume you spend the most time on the number one priority and then decreasing amounts of time on each priority under the first. So that would mean I spend the most time on God, then second most on your spouse, then your kids, then work, then other things? But no one does that, do they? Work and sleep probably get most of that. Priorities can't be equated with time.

So, is it about money? Perhaps we invest in the order of priority. If so, we should spend the most money on God, then your spouse, then the kids.... That's obviously not the case, although as a pastor, it might not be a bad idea to teach that ;-)

Maybe it's about the order of a day? So, God first means that you give time to God first thing in the morning every day before anything else. You read the Bible and pray before you check email or eat breakfast. Then once you have ticked the do box for God, you can move to your second priority. But that means God is disconnected from the rest of your day. Isn't part of honouring God being a good spouse, parent and employee? Not just that, but my kids normally wake me up when it's time to get up and they don't come in till # 3!

Is it energy or intensity? No. That doesn't seem to fit either.

What happened to me was that I just feel guiltier every day because there is always something more I think I should be doing in each one of these. Something is wrong about the whole thing.

There is this pressure on us that life is meant to be balanced and stable with every day similar to the day before it. It assumes that we can perfectly balance all our priorities with the right mixture of all responsibilities happening at the same time.

So, the issue is always how to perfectly balance the sands of the hour-glass into this scale so that there isn't a tilt in any one direction. But, there are so many problems with this:

For one, it assumes that everything in work or at home is stable and requires the same amount of attention day in/day out. But, it's not like that, is it? A spouse or child gets sick and it throws things out at home. Financial year returns are due and work pressure goes up. Some months, more sand of the hourglass is needed at work. Some weeks, home life demands more. It's not in balance. It's changing all the time. Life cannot be managed like that. Things happen that require us to move things around. The sand continues to fall and we are left with what we have to make the best of it that we can. Put hand on your heart. It's beating, isn't it? (we don't want it to stop). Time goes on even when something interferes with the balanced life we have designed.

Not only that, but our lives are not just about work and home. There's other arms needed in the scale of life. In fact, let's brainstorm some of the things that we are told we need to do regularly to live a healthy life: *Eating; Kids; Sleep; Bible; Work; Education; Citizen; Gardening; Hobbies; self/ exercise...*

How many arms in the balance are needed for all that? When I put all those expectations on me every day, what I hear is that 'I need to try harder.' So, I get up earlier and stay up later, still fail to live out all the expectations and no longer get the 8 hours of sleep I'm expected to have!! I've never heard someone say that they have everything in perfect balance for more than the odd day or two.

And yet, all around is this pressure to have everything in balance. Just google 'a balanced life' and it provides 14,000,000 links immediately with various 5 steps balancing work and family. I read them, try to do them and end up with more guilt each time. What's more, I see an increase in the expectations on all of us. We're meant to be accessible 24/7 to all our friends via cellphone, facebook or Twitter – plant our own vegetables, be in the top of our work, be the best father, and be leave a legacy from our contribution to society!

What I'm coming to see is that the balanced life is a myth. I put it alongside the thought people had 400 years ago that the world was flat and that if you sailed to far in one direction, you would fall off the edge.

“It’s the central myth of the modern workplace: With a few compromises, you can have it all. But, it’s all wrong, and it’s making us crazy. ... The truth is, balance is bunk. It is an unattainable pipe dream. . . . The quest for balance between work and life, as we’ve come to think of it, isn’t just a losing proposition; it’s a hurtful, destructive one.” – Keith Hammonds, ‘Balance is Bunk!’

Balance is not the way God designed the world. What’s more, I never find any instruction to balance my life in the Bible. Neither do I find biblical characters that seemed to have life in balance.

There’s a different approach that makes a lot of sense to me. I can credit my thoughts today to Bruce Miller who recently put his thoughts in print. I want to take some of his thoughts today and share them with you.

Live your Life in Rhythm.

Life is full of seasons and rhythms. That’s the way God has made the world.

God created seasons, days, and years:

14 Then God said, “Let lights appear in the sky to separate the day from the night. Let them mark off the seasons, days, and years. (Genesis 1:14) NLT

There are phases of the moon, the tides of the sea, the seasons of the earth – nature is filled with cycles and seasons. Birds migrate as winter descends. Trees flower and plants bloom as spring arrives. Days and years carry their own rhythms. Our day begins with sunrise and finishes at sunset.

All around nature are these rhythms and seasons. There are different times for different activities. The song, ‘turn, turn, turn’ by the Byrds reminds us of that. (play). There is a season for everything. It doesn’t all happen at once. You might not have realised it but those words come right out of a wisdom book in the Bible called Ecclesiastes, one of the books in our Vertical Reading Plan.

*1 For everything there is a season,
a time for every activity under heaven.*

*2 A time to be born and a time to die.
A time to plant and a time to harvest.*

*3 A time to kill and a time to heal.
A time to tear down and a time to build up.*

*4 A time to cry and a time to laugh.
A time to grieve and a time to dance.*

*5 A time to scatter stones and a time to gather stones.
A time to embrace and a time to turn away.*

*6 A time to search and a time to quit searching.
A time to keep and a time to throw away.*

7 A time to tear and a time to mend.

A time to be quiet and a time to speak.

8 A time to love and a time to hate.

A time for war and a time for peace.

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NLT)

Most of these things are not done at the same time, in some sort of crazy balance. We are not to be born and die, plant and harvest, weep and laugh in balance at the same time. Rather, they are in different seasons.

Our own lives have times of celebration and grief, study and work, and different life seasons - singleness is different to marriage. A family of 2 adults is different to a family with 3 children.

Most workplaces have busy seasons. Retail has just had their frantic season where a major percentage of their annual income comes from just one month in the lead up to Christmas. To have a balanced work schedule in such an environment is crazy. Some people are going to work long hours at some parts of the year.

We see seasons even in sports. There is an off-time, a training time and test games. There is a time for the All Blacks to win and a time for them to loose ;-)

Our lives are best lived in rhythm, not balance. That’s why God directed his people in ancient times to follow various rhythms. In the Old Testament, we can read of annual festivals and sacrifices, monthly rituals following the movement of the moon, a weekly Sabbath of rest, along with daily times of prayer. They do not all cram into one day or one week. There are seasons of activity where some things require more attention and focus than other seasons.

So, what I want to do today is help take off you any unnecessary guilt, stress and the weights many of you carry in the expectation to have a balanced life with everything in step. Rather, I want us to step into 2010 with some wisdom about what expectations are healthy and some intention to seeing those expectations realized.

III. Let me give me some things I have found very helpful from Bruce Millers approach:

1. Identify your personal season and life stage

There are different seasons in life.

Jeremiah says,

“Even the stork that flies across the sky knows the time of her migration, as do the turtledove, the swallow, and the crane. They all return at the proper time each year.” - Jeremiah 8:7

These birds know what season it is and act accordingly.

Proverbs 30:25 says,

“Ants—they aren’t strong, but they store up food all summer.” - Prov 30:25

In other words, Ants know what time it is. They realize that summer is the time to work hard because in winter, food is scarce and if they haven’t banked up enough, they’re history. They live their little lives in the season they are in. The teaching behind that it is that we are meant to learn from ants to appreciate the season of life and live appropriately to that season.

PERSONAL SEASONS

There are some seasons in life that last for a few days or few weeks or months. I call these ‘personal seasons.’ It might be a busy time at work in March or early December followed by a more relaxing month – like January. It might be 9 months of pregnancy. These are personal seasons. Each season has it’s own limitations and opportunities that need to be identified. If you’re 8 months pregnant, it’s not a time to run a marathon, right?

You might be recovering from an accident, between jobs, moving into the area, starting a new business, newly married. You might be going through grief. Counsellors tell us that grief has its own cycle that includes various stages including anger, depression and acceptance. If we try to fight these stages, it jeopardises our physical and emotional health. It would be like running a marathon at 8 months pregnant.

LIFE STAGE

There are also longer stages that most people will experience at different times and go from one to the other.

My daughter is learning about life stages. She identifies a baby, knows her brother is a toddler and that she a preschooler. Each of those has different traits. She has fun at times mimicing what a baby does and what a toddler does, knowing that she is a preschooler. There are other life stages - Children, teens, young adults, married, married with babies, married with toddlers, married in an empty nest, retired – all these are different life stages. Each stage is unique. We pass from one to the other. This is the cycle of life:

“You kiss your newborn’s head, then kiss his cheek on the first day of school, then hear about his first kiss, then hear the minister say, ‘you may now kiss the bride.’ Before you know it, you are watching him kiss his newborn’s head as the cycles begins again. You hope you will be able to give your grandbaby many kisses and to live long enough to hear again, ‘you may now kiss the bride.’” (Bruce Miller)

It’s good to take some time to identify your personal season and life stage and reflect on the limitations and opportunities these bring.

That leads to the next point:

2. Release false expectations

Over time, we can absorb all sorts of expectations from society, families, even church. Some of these are sensible. Some are ludicrous for the season we are in. You might try to balance it all – but, from my experience, I just feel guilty at the expectations I am not living up to.

When we strive for a balanced life without regard for the unique personal seasons and life stages we’re in, we take on burdens that we don’t need to bear. We get weighed down with false expectations that just add a whole lot of stress on us.

Once you’ve identified the life stage you can then reflect on the limitations that your particular personal season or life stage carries with it.

Right now, I have a daughter who turns 3 on Tuesday and a son who turned 1 last November. That brings some limitations to what I do. Before I had children, I was on two different Boards. Now, I am not – because I am in a different life stage.

Likewise, Robyn has decided to stay home with our children. She is a qualified teacher and counsellor. She is beginning some counselling this year – but around what she can do with the limitations of 2 children at home.

We have put aside the expectation that our house will be spotless and our garden pristine. After all, we have small children along with other responsibilities. We see those as unhealthy expectations – may happen but don’t have to happen.

If you have a very young baby, it is probably not the time for long workouts, involvement in serious bible studies, and leading children’s ministry. It’s probably more a time for bite-size devotionals, some coffee and getting as much sleep as your can.

The same is true in personal seasons. When you are on vacation, you don’t need to reply to emails and calls. It is a time to rest and focus on recreation.

If you have a parent who is dying, it is a time to focus on that. Release yourself from the expectation of keeping up correspondence with friends from the past.

If you have final exams, it is not a time to keep balance with the same family responsibilities, an extra job, ministry, in-depth bible study. It’s a time to study and pass your exam!

There are likely different financial seasons you will experience. A young adult makes decisions on his/her own. A newly married couple has different responsibilities. A couple in their 50s with no children at home are likely in a different financial situation again. Our finances likely reflect the life stages we are in. We need different financial expectations at each one.

Not only do we need to identify healthy expectations and release ourselves some unhealthy ones, we should also ...

3. Seize opportunities

Just as each stage brings limitations, it also brings unique opportunities.

If your single, you can spend your time moaning about the fact that you are not in a relationship. A better alternative though is to seize the opportunity you have and throw yourself into volunteering for life-changing ventures.

The apostle Paul picks up on that:

“An unmarried man can spend his time doing the Lord’s work and thinking how to please him. But a married man has to think about his earthly responsibilities and how to please his wife. His interests are divided.” – I Corinthians 7:32-34

When recovering from an injury and unable to work, seize the unique opportunity of that season, you can moan about having to stay home. Or, you can read books you’ve always wanted to read, take extended times to pray, enjoy long conversations with friends. Seize the opportunity you have. It will be over soon enough.

If you have babies and young kids – take hold of the classic advice from experienced parents I hear often – ‘They’re only babies for such a short time. Treasure these days.’ Hold them more. Kiss and cuddle them. Soon, you won’t be able to do so.

If you’re experiencing the empty nest, rather than resent the silence in the house, seize the opportunity. You have more time and often more money than at any other points in your life. Rather than use it on yourself, think of the huge opportunities God has afforded you in this season. Use it well.

A retired person may resent growing old. Instead, they seize the opportunity of time to begin a new hobby and longer conversations. There are many experiences and wisdom retirees have that others much younger yearn for. Seize the opportunity. Do something with it.

All of us need to live in the life stage we are in. Each has limitations. Each has opportunities. Be content with the limitations and release yourself from wrong expectations for that season. Seize the unique opportunities of the season you are in, rather than yearn for opportunities that aren’t part of your season right now.

4. Intentionally move the fulcrum back and forth in rhythm

The fulcrum is the pivot on the lever. In people seeking the myth of balance, it’s always in the middle. But, it doesn’t have to be. At times, it needs to be moved closer to family, closer to work, closer to church, closer to self-care.

One way, I’ve found that I can do that is from a helpful exercise I’ve borrowed which follows a cycle from nature as an example:

- Annual – just like the earth orbits the sun once a year, there are some things in life that might be annual things to experience.
- Some things can be quarterly. Business often plan based on quarters. Seasons seem to do the same – with our 4 seasons. Why not do the same in personal life?
- Some things are monthly, just like a cycle of the moon.
- Some things are weekly, like God’s design for Sabbath (we’ll look more at that next week).
- Some things are daily, like the rotation of the earth.

Most of us overestimate what we can accomplish in a day or a week, but we underestimate what we can accomplish in a season. Rather than live in the same way day after day, year after year with the same expectations for each of those days and year, identify some intentional

I’m finding that using these takes pressure off each day and helps me intentionally live up healthy expectations in the life stage I am in. You might come up with some other system but I encourage you to take the pressure off the cultural demand to pursue everything at once – in balance. Instead, intentionally move the fulcrum back in forth in rhythm.

Now, this approach might be used in the hands of a few in wrong ways. Someone might say, ‘I’m ignoring my family right now because I need to focus on getting my business going.’ There a various responsibilities we all have and each of these carries some real expectations.

If you’re interested in some more help on this, I’d encourage you to pick up a copy of the book ‘Your Life in Rhythm.’ By Bruce Miller. We’ll be reading this through as a staff team this year in the hope of thinking through how this relates to our church seasons as well... There is a website you can go to: www.yourlifeinrhythm.com

As we step into a new year, I want each of you to take off any unnecessary guilt, stress and the weights many of you carry in the expectation to have a balanced life with everything in step you take. Rather, I want each of us to step into 2010 with some wisdom about what expectations are healthy and some intention to seeing those expectations realized. We can’t perfectly balance the sands of our life hour-glass but we can live our lives in rhythm.