

## **“Finding Peace in the Age of Information Overload”**

**Psalm 63; Luke 10:38-42**

October 29, 2023

In the late 1990's, there was a highly successful capital trading firm known as Long Term Capital Management or LTCM. LTCM boasted an impressive array of economists and thinkers, even having Nobel Laurates on its staff. As a result, they'd come up with a trading strategy that was very impressive, making substantial returns for its' investors. They initially dealt specifically with slight price adjustments in the bond market and exploiting those for massive gains. Soon, their innovative approach brought them scores of investors, ready to make large gains as well. But here's where things went downhill. They decided that their strategy, which was working very well in the bond realm, would work in other capital markets. So, they expanded radically into these new areas, hiring people and experts to help them manage those new markets as well as they'd done with the bond market. But, as a result, they ended up trying to drink from a water hose, in a matter of speaking. They went into information overload. Long story short, they became plagued with the problems that typically arise from too-much info and failed in a stunningly short period of time. From market heroes to market zeros in a short period of time.

I begin this way because as I look out and see, heck, as I live my own life, I see in myself and many others this ongoing slide, further and further into our screens. I can't help but humorously recall a security video that made the rounds a decade or so ago. In it is pictured a lovely mall's indoor fountain, you know the kind where, as kids, you'd beg your Mom to give you a penny to throw in to make a wish? Well, the image on the screen shows that but soon into view comes a woman. She's wearing glasses but, even from a distance, you can see that she's watching her phone. But the thing is, she's walking on direct, dead-end path with the fountain. So, you keep watching, hoping that the woman will become aware of her surroundings and adjust accordingly. But...SHE DOESN'T and into the water she plunges. It's a good recovery though given the size of the gaffe, she brushes it off pretty well, you'll have to Google it to see what I'm talking about.

I think we all have seen something similar, if not quite so dramatic. I know I've seen drivers I've thought were drunk, straighten out and drive well, letting me know that they were probably just texting while trying to drive, never a good idea as we all know. And while this danger of the age of information is pretty well-known, there are others that come from our addiction to knowing and doing more.

In the modern age, where data streams are relentless and ever-expanding, the phenomenon of information overload has become increasingly prevalent. This saturation of data, especially in the digital realm, poses several psychological dangers that can profoundly impact an individual's well-being and cognitive functioning.

One of the most immediate effects of information overload *is the marked increase in stress and anxiety levels*. The ceaseless barrage of information, especially when it's of a conflicting or negative nature, can be mentally taxing. For instance, the 24/7 news cycles, replete with distressing headlines, can invoke a sense of perpetual crisis, heightening anxiety in consumers. This heightened stress is not just a fleeting feeling; it can have long-term psychological implications, potentially leading to chronic anxiety disorders.

The sheer volume of available information can also lead to *decision paralysis*. Faced with a plethora of options and data points, individuals may feel overwhelmed, hindering their ability to make timely and effective decisions. The fear of making the wrong choice, when bombarded with too many options, can result in a complete halt, a paralysis, where individuals find themselves unable to decide at all.

Memory functions, too, bear the brunt of this overflow. *Constant inundation with data can lead to reduced memory and recall capabilities*. As individuals try to assimilate vast amounts of information, the brain's capacity to retain specific details gets compromised, adversely affecting both learning and productivity. Moreover, the brain, when overwhelmed, tends to lose its creative edge. A mind constantly engaged in processing incoming information has little room for daydreaming, reflecting, or thinking outside the box. Moments of quiet, devoid of information consumption, are essential crucibles for creative and innovative thought.

*Another concerning fallout of information overload is the fragmentation of attention, resulting in lowered concentration and focus.* The digital age's distractions, from smartphone notifications to email alerts, can scatter attention, making deep focus on singular tasks increasingly elusive. This constant state of divided attention can, over time, erode the ability to engage in deep work or sustained concentration. *Further, the ceaseless demand for cognitive processing leads to mental fatigue, clouding judgment and impairing rational decision-making.* This cognitive exhaustion not only hampers productivity but also affects personal well-being. Add to this the emotional toll. The inundation with emotionally charged news or updates can strain emotional regulation, leading to mood imbalances or heightened emotional reactivity.

*Lastly, the very nature of the digital realm, with its infinite streams of updates, can give rise to FOMO, or the Fear of Missing Out.* This fear can drive compulsive behaviors, like incessantly checking news feeds or social media, further deepening the quagmire of information overload. In essence, while the access to vast amounts of information in the digital age has its merits, the consequent information overload poses significant psychological challenges. Recognizing these effects and taking proactive measures to counteract them is crucial in maintaining mental well-being in today's hyper-connected world.

The facts here are stunning. According to Microsoft, the average attention span has decreased four whole seconds in just ten years, marking the toll that the digital age has taken on us. *77% of people feel the need to check their phones constantly.* Things have gotten pretty bad quickly, to say nothing of the lack of imagination that we see being applied to the country's biggest problems. Instead of solving things, we stay engaged in data collection and arguing about the data, never trying to creatively imagine a solution. Dr. Larry Rosen, clinical psychologist boils it all down for us in one simple sentence – **“Constant digital engagement creates a heightened level of stress and anxiety.”** Sounds about right? Are you overloaded, overwhelmed, short on attention, patience and peace? I am too. That's why this sermon series I'm hopeful can be so useful in overcoming our technology addictions and living a faith-inspired life, dedicated to helping others in the name of Jesus Christ. It's a means to throw overboard, so to speak, the junk that bogs us down and junks us up with anxiety and depression and worry and fear and overall discontentment.

A few years ago when I was at River Hills Community Church, I had the privilege of meeting David and Tracy, a young couple in their early thirties. They were both professionals, always on their smartphones, and, like many, they found themselves constantly immersed in the digital world. One day, as they were reflecting on the state of their relationship, they realized that their devices were coming between them. We had them over for dinner, shortly after they'd made this decision. David and Tracy decided it was time for a change. They made a bold decision to embark on a tech-free weekend getaway to a remote cabin in the woods. They packed their bags with books, board games, and an old-fashioned camera to capture memories without the distraction of their smartphones. As they arrived at the cabin, David and Tracy were greeted by the serenity of nature, the sound of birds, and the rustling of leaves in the wind. They realized how much they had been missing in the constant buzz of notifications and emails. During that weekend, they enjoyed long walks, deep conversations, and even tried their hand at cooking meals together without the aid of online recipes. They recounted stories from their past, laughed at silly jokes, and rekindled their connection without the interference of screens. One evening, as they sat by the fireplace, Mark shared a thought that had been on his mind for a while. He said, "You know, we've been so busy with work and technology that we've neglected the most important aspect of our lives—each other." Sarah nodded in agreement, and they both acknowledged how the constant digital distractions had taken a toll on their relationship. By the end of the tech-free weekend, Sarah and Mark felt rejuvenated. They realized that they didn't need to be constantly plugged in to find happiness and contentment. Instead, they found joy in each other's company, in the simplicity of life without screens, and in the beauty of the natural world around them.

This real-life story of Sarah and Mark serves as a reminder that sometimes, stepping away from the digital noise can lead to a deeper connection with our loved ones and a newfound sense of peace and contentment. The Bible tells us a story that I think does a pretty good job of shining a critical light on our information-overload society.

In a quaint town named Bethany, two sisters, Mary and Martha, lived in a bustling household. Their home was a hub of activity, with neighbors, friends, and family frequently passing through. Martha, the elder of the two, was always on her feet, managing the affairs of the house, ensuring that every guest was well-fed, and every corner of their home was in order. She thrived on staying busy, always multitasking, a trait many in today's digital age might relate to. Whether it was preparing meals, tidying up, or engaging in the social niceties expected of her, Martha was perpetually engrossed. Mary, on the other hand, had a different approach to life. She understood the value of stillness and the profound impact of moments of quiet reflection. In today's terms, one might say she was resistant to the 'digital distractions' of her era. She recognized the profound joy and learning that came from being present, truly present, in a moment. One day, Jesus visited their home. As always, Martha was absorbed in her duties, wanting to ensure that everything was perfect for their esteemed guest. The clinking of dishes, the rustling of leaves as she hurriedly picked fresh herbs, and her soft murmurs filled the house. In contrast, Mary chose to sit at Jesus' feet, listening intently to His teachings, absorbing every word, every nuance. In that room, as Jesus spoke, time seemed to stand still for Mary. The outside world, with its cacophony of distractions, faded away. Martha, noticing her sister's inaction, felt a surge of frustration. Here she was, running about, managing a hundred chores, while Mary simply sat, seemingly oblivious to the needs of the household. She approached Jesus, hoping He would understand her plight. *"Lord," she implored, "Don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"* Jesus, with a gentle smile and understanding in His eyes, replied, *"Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."*

In His profound wisdom, Jesus highlighted a universal truth. In our relentless pursuit of 'doing', of being perpetually engaged, often with digital distractions in today's age, we sometimes forget the essence of 'being'. Mary, in her wisdom, chose to be present, to seek peace and quietude in the company of Christ, understanding that in such moments lay the true essence of life. She recognized that in the age of distractions, sometimes the best thing we can do for our souls is to pause, to listen, and to immerse ourselves in the profound peace that Christ offers. This tale of two sisters is not just a Biblical narrative; it's a poignant reminder for all of us. In a world inundated with notifications, where screens often dictate our lives, the story underscores the importance of seeking moments of serenity, of connecting deeply with our spiritual selves, and realizing that, sometimes, the path to true contentment lies in quiet reflection at the feet of the Savior. In a world where the constant hum of activity is often deafening, there's a profound lesson to be learned from the contrasting silence of monastic life. Picture, if you will, the serene setting of a monastery nestled in the mountains. The air is pristine, the surroundings peaceful, and the predominant sound is the rhythmic chanting of prayers. Now, contrast this with the bustling streets of a city, where car horns blare, screens flash incessantly, and the rapid pace of life leaves little room for reflection. This stark difference serves as a powerful illustration of the choices we make in our daily lives. While not all of us can retreat to a monastery, we can certainly strive to create pockets of peace in our own environments.

This reminds me of a story about a renowned theologian who, feeling overwhelmed by the cacophony of modern life, decided to take a radical step. He took a vow of silence for an entire year. His aim? To better listen to God. Many were perplexed by his decision, but for him, it was a transformative experience. By intentionally muting the external world, he found he could tune into the divine whispers that were previously drowned out. He emerged from this silent sojourn with a deeper understanding of his faith and a renewed sense of purpose.

So, what can we learn from this? Here's a practical tip: while we might not all be equipped to take a year-long vow of silence, we can certainly carve out spaces in our daily routines that are free from the constant barrage of digital distractions. Consider designating a "tech-free" zone or time in your home. Use this sacred space or time to connect with God, meditate, pray, or simply reflect. In this digital age, sometimes the most radical act of faith is to simply unplug. In the relentless whirlwind of life, it's easy to feel adrift, lost amidst the waves of challenges and distractions.

Consider the illustration of Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, attempting the miraculous act of walking

on water. The waters were tumultuous, and the storm raged on, representing the chaos of life. But Peter, with his eyes fixed on Jesus, managed to walk on the water, defying nature. It was only when he let the storm around him distract his focus from Jesus that he began to sink. This poignant episode from the Bible underscores the importance of focusing on Christ, even when the storms of life threaten to pull us under. In the chaotic dance of life, it's essential to find our rhythm in Christ and let His guidance lead the way.

In our modern, hyper-connected world, we often find ourselves tethered to our devices. And while they offer convenience and connection, they can also be sources of distraction and stress. I'm reminded of a humorous anecdote: once my phone decided to take an unexpected spa day—it just stopped working with no rhyme or reason about five years ago. I was positively panicked. How would I survive the day? But something happened that surprised me. With my phone out of commission, that day turned out to be one of the most tranquil and peaceful days I'd experienced in years. It was a startling realization of just how much our devices dictate our daily rhythms.

This brings me to a practical tip for cultivating digital discipline: set specific times during the day for checking emails and social media. Instead of being constantly available and reactive, allocate certain windows—perhaps once in the morning and once in the evening—to catch up on digital communications. To help stay focused during work or study sessions, consider using apps like "Forest", which gamify concentration and deter you from picking up your phone impulsively.

If you're looking for a deeper dive into this subject, I highly recommend the book "Digital Minimalism" by Cal Newport. Newport offers insightful strategies on how to navigate our digital lives with intentionality and purpose, ensuring that our devices serve us rather than the other way around.

But it's not just about managing our screen time; it's also about rediscovering the world beyond those screens. As a collective activity, I'd like to challenge the congregation to a 24-hour digital fast. Switch off those smartphones, tablets, and computers, and immerse yourself in the tangible, tactile world around you.

This reminds me of a story about a family who decided to go on a camping trip. They made a pact: no gadgets allowed. Initially, the kids were restless, missing their games and videos. But as the days progressed, they began to reconnect with nature and each other. They shared stories around a campfire, played in the river, and marveled at the night sky, untainted by city lights. It was a profound reminder of the beauty and connection available to us when we step away from our screens.

In the words of an insightful soul, "Sometimes, you have to disconnect to connect." This is not just about connecting with the world around us but also about forging deeper connections with our own selves and our loved ones.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.