

## **“Dealing with Delays”**

### **Ezra 1:1-7**

*Series: The Story Chapter 19 The Return Home*

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It took almost four years to build. It can go over 17,000 miles per hour. It has traveled almost 150 million miles. No, this is not the latest from Detroit. It's Discovery – the third of NASA's five Space Shuttles. From its first flight in August 1984 to its final trip in February 2011, Discovery logged a full year, 365 days, in orbit. It also completed many historic missions including launching the Hubble telescope, the first Russian on an American ship, the first female pilot, and the oldest person in space, Astronaut and Senator John Glenn.

Yet twenty years ago this week the Discovery was grounded. The launch was delayed not by budget cuts or protestors but by woodpeckers - yellow-shafted flickers to be precise. NASA engineers found their beaks made 70 holes in the insulation around the fuel tanks. Apparently the males attract females by tap-tap-tapping away on a dead limb or a metal roof. These birds decided to go for the big time.

The damaged insulation, an orange-colored coating of plastic foam one to two inches thick, prevents ice from forming when the silo-shaped tank is being filled with super-cold propellants, liquid hydrogen and liquid oxygen, for the shuttle's three main engines.<sup>1</sup>

The ice could break off and cause tragic damage. So a 200 billion dollar space craft, designed to deal with the stress of a fiery blastoff and re-entry, was delayed from launching by a lovesick Woody Woodpecker.

Delays come into your life and mine. None of us likes to wait. The faster technology gets the more impatient we become. Recently Gloria preached a great message about waiting on God. I thought, “That's a really good idea. I should try that.” Then I left Woodside, drove down Stony Hill Road and discovered the railroad crossing gate was down. There was a train of black tanker cars stretching all the way back to Jersey City. They crept along, stopped and then started going backwards. Nearly every car in front of me turned around and left. I was about to do the same when I remembered Gloria's sermon about waiting. Curses! Apparently God thought I needed practice.

No one is delighted with delays. Major delays, the ones which derail us, are usually caused by some big break – a break up, a break down, a heart-breaking loss. Those are the ones which stop us in our tracks, cause us to change course, put us in a holding pattern, send us in for repairs. We don't realize the big breaks and the major delays are often the cumulative result of a lot of little rapping and tapping, picking and

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<sup>1</sup>John Wilford, “Lovesick Woodpeckers Poke Hole in a Shuttle's Schedule” *The New York Times*, June 3, 1995.

pecking. Over time the stresses and challenges of life wear down our insulation – that coating of protection we’ve developed to shield ourselves against opposition, criticism, disappointments, frustrations and fears. Sometimes an iciness forms on the outside that breaks off and damages our relationships. Sometimes we let off a fiery explosion that burns us and others. What started off so promisingly turns into a scrapped mission. How do you deal with delays?

God’s people face this very question when they return home to Jerusalem. In Chapter 19, the Lord launches a major, miraculous turn of events. While Judah is in exile the unthinkable unfolds: the mighty Babylonian Empire falls almost without a fight. God’s people outlasted their enemies. As good as this is, what happens next is even more miraculous: the victorious Persian Empire reverses policy and decides to send the Jews home. God predicted and promised this through His prophets.

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’” (Ezra 1:1-4)

Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire, sends the Jews home, tells them to rebuild a Temple to their God, encourages them to financially support it and even kicks in a contribution himself. He also generously returns the golden treasures King Nebuchadnezzar took from Solomon’s Temple.

So Zerubbabel, a descendent of King David and Joshua, a priest from the line of Aaron, return with thousands of people and offerings to rebuild the Temple, the city of Jerusalem and the nation. They make a great beginning.

They **Put God First**. Ezra chapter 3 says:

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, the people assembled together as one in Jerusalem. Then Joshua son of Jozadak and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses the man of God. Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar on its foundation and sacrificed burnt offerings on it to the Lord, both the morning and evening sacrifices. (Ezra 3:1-3)

They did the opposite of what we would do. Most of us think security first. Build the walls, then the government projects, then the Temple. Yet in the face of almost certain attack, God’s people build the altar first and lay the foundation of the Temple years

before they build the walls. This risky decision reveals their true priorities. The altar is their primary connection with God. On the altar the priests offer the sacrifices which wipe away sin and restore their relationship with the Lord. Seventy years of defeat, destruction and deportation taught them a painful lesson: without God there is no security. Without God they are nothing. Apart from God they can do nothing. Their hope, strength and security come from their relationship with God. Without Him they haven't a prayer.

It's easy for God to fall out of first place in our lives. We get busy and obey whatever is urgent. There are work deadlines, business trips and travel soccer games, food shopping, finals and Facebook, home improvements, TV shows and commuting. If things are going reasonably well, God drops down the priority list. We miss a bunch of worship services, don't have time for a Growth Group, fire off a few brief prayers in the car, let the Bible collect a little dust. Why do we wait until delays interrupt our lives, why do we wait until tragedy strikes to suddenly snap back to God?

Don't learn this lesson the hard way. Keep strong in your relationship with God. Make it your vital primary connection. Put worship, prayer, Scripture and Growth Group first in your schedule. Make it a priority to worship God at least every Sunday this summer. Now you don't have to worship here at Woodside. You can worship wherever you are on vacation. Just make sure you bring me back a bulletin from that service – signed by the pastor.

Put God first because delays will attempt to disrupt that relationship. The Jews faced **Opposition from the Outside**. The Samaritans were living in the land when the Jews returned from Babylon. Samaritans are a mixed breed of Israelites and other nations. At first, they seem friendly and offer help to rebuild the Temple. The Jewish leaders, however, refuse the offer.

But Zerubbabel, Joshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, "You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us." Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They bribed officials to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:3-5)

Now the true motives of the Samaritans come out. They fear the return of Judah and the quickest way to weaken them is to cut their connection with God. So they use bribery and corruption to stop them. And they are successful. The local officials call a halt to construction on the Temple.

The only enemies deadlier than those who attack us, are the ones who pretend to be our friends. When I think about the seven deadly sins - anger, envy, greed, gluttony, laziness, lust and pride - I believe what makes them deadly is not when they come at us with a full-frontal attack but with a sly tempting invitation. Each one makes a friendly offer to satisfy my hunger, to fill the empty place in me, the place only God can fill.

For the Jews the opposition from the outside led to a second danger: **Indulgence on the Inside**. Construction of the Temple stopped. So much opposition pecked away at their insulation until the project became permanently delayed. Nobody intended it to stop. But you know how delays work. “We’ll get to it next week...by the end of the month...sometime this summer...in the fall...before the year is out.” Before you realize, one year passes, then five, ten, fifteen. For sixteen years the Temple stands as an abandoned construction site covered in weeds and debris. Meanwhile, the homes of God’s people get quite fancy. Finally the Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai:

This is what the Lord Almighty says: “These people say, ‘The time has not yet come to rebuild the Lord’s house.’” Then the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: “Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your paneled houses, while this house remains a ruin?” (Haggai 1:2-4)

While God’s house was a pile of sunbaked rubble, their homes were paneled. Now I know paneling doesn’t sound like a luxury. It’s more of a retro 70’s basement look. Yet in those days paneling was an expensive luxury, not a necessity, since there are very few trees in the Holy Land. The people indulged themselves by investing in their houses instead of building up the House of the Lord.

There is no sin in making your house nice. The problem is there is also no limit. We indulge ourselves because we have been sold the lie that things bring fulfillment and contentment. Our community is filled with incredibly nice fashionable houses. And still I hear and see a profound lack of contentment, fulfillment and peace here. This was true back in Haggai’s time.

Now this is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Give careful thought to your ways. Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build my house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord. (Haggai 1:5-8)

They indulged themselves. They put themselves first but they were never satisfied, never content, never at peace. When I was in seminary, the apartment they gave us had paneling. At first I thought this was great – no other apartments had it. Then I discovered why it was paneled: to mask the black mold growing on all the walls. The mold blended in with the brown paneling. Luxuries look good and feel good but they only cover over what’s growing underneath – the spreading black mold of sadness, selfishness and sin. When delays hit our lives, luxurious paneling can’t stop the pain.

Eventually, God’s people got the message. Once again they put the Lord first and finished the Temple. Years later Jesus would say the same:

So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father

knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matthew 6:31-33)

The way to deal with delays is to rely on the power of God who helps us stand up to opposition on the outside and fill up our hearts on the inside. That's how the NASA engineers stopped the woodpeckers from attacking the shuttle. They put up something more powerful to scare them away – the sounds and the images of owls. The delays were over. Discovery launched far above where any woodpecker could fly.

Two and half years ago we committed to LAUNCH. You and I made commitments of ourselves and our financial resources to reduce the mortgage on this building, to help build a home through Habitat for Humanity, to help launch a new ministry to homeless families called Family Promise and to launch the Middletown Campus. We are approaching the last six months of this flight path. I ask you to please take a moment in the next week to check out where you are in your pledge and, to commit to completing it by the end of this year. We will be sending out a statement this week to let you know where you are and you can always check your giving by going on the Vine.

I know it is hard sometimes to write that check or to make that offering when there are so many things you want to do for your house, your car, your bills, college educations, vacations and retirement. I feel that as well. I am not saying that giving to the Lord's house will prevent delays from happening in your life. What I can guarantee is when you give to LAUNCH you are making room for people who need help with the delays in their lives. You are providing a home for a struggling family through Habitat for Humanity. You are offering shelter for homeless families that have nowhere to go. You are filling this room on frigid winter nights with cots for our homeless neighbors. You make room for those who are seeking liberation and recovery from the grip of addiction. You make it possible for the joyous sound of children's voices to echo off these walls at Sunday School, Adventure Club and Vacation Bible School. You provide a safe and fun place for Junior Highs and Senior Highs to become like Jesus. You provide a place where dresses are made for children in Haiti through Clothed with Compassion, meals are served to the poor through the Dinner Ministry, Basketball is played before a Guys' Bible study and the Middletown Campus reaches new believers beyond these walls.

It takes sacrifice to take second place and put God first.

But it's the only way to soar with God.