

## **“Dealing with Delays”**

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

*Series: Cliff Notes on the Bible Week 7. The Return Home*

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It took four years to build. It can go 17,000 miles per hour. It has traveled almost 150 million miles. It's 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 total of 365 days in orbit. It launched the Hubble telescope. Its crews included the first Russian on an American ship, the first female pilot, and the oldest person in space, Astronaut and Senator John Glenn.

Yet at one point the Discovery was grounded...by woodpeckers - yellow-shafted flickers to be precise. NASA engineers found 200 holes in the insulation around the fuel tanks. Apparently the males attract females by tapping on metal.

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 fuels.<sup>1</sup>

The ice could break off and cause tragic damage. So a 200-billion-dollar space craft, designed to face fiery blastoffs was delayed by a lovesick Woody Woodpecker. To stop the woodpeckers from attacking the shuttle, the NASA engineers 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 can fly.

Delays drive all of us crazy. No one likes to wait. The faster technology gets the more impatient we become. Once I preached a sermon on patience. Then I left Woodside, and was stopped at a railroad crossing. The train cars stretched 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 my 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 pecking. Over time the stresses and challenges of life wear down our insulation – that

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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.

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 scraped mission.

How do you deal with delays? God's people constantly face this question. I included in your handout a Bible Timeline to put all these events of our Cliff Notes series in order. You may remember the Patriarchs waited for the Promised Land. Moses and the Israelites waited 40 years in the wilderness. Gideon, Samson and the Judges waited for deliverance from enemies. David waited for a Temple which his son Solomon built. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians. They gave up waiting to return home. So they settled down, assimilated and disappeared. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was taken captive by Babylon. They waited and waited 70 years.

Then 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 outlast 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 the Babylonians took from Solomon's Temple. So Zerubbabel, a descendent of King David, and Joshua, a priest from the line of Aaron, return with thousands to rebuild the Temple, the city of Jerusalem and the nation. They make a great beginning. How did they deal with delays?

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. 70 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, streaming movies, 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 primary connection. Put worship, prayer, Scripture and Growth Group first in your schedule. Make it a priority to worship God every Sunday – in person or online. Visitors say to me, "I love this church but I live too far away." I reply, "I am with you always." "How?" they ask. "Have you heard of this new thing called the Internet? We're on it – 24/7/365. But you can also find an in person worship wherever you are."

Put God first because sooner or later you will face **Opposition from the Outside**. The Samaritans are living in the land when the Jews return 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. They successfully use bribery and corruption to stop them. The local officials halt 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.

That's why opposition from the outside leads 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 speaks 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 is a pile of sunbaked rubble, their homes are paneled. Now I know paneling doesn't sound like a luxury. It's more of a retro 70's basement look. Yet with few trees in the Holy Land, paneling is an expensive luxury, not a necessity. The people indulge themselves beautifying 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 fashionable houses which are so stuffed we rent storage sheds. And still I hear and see a profound lack of contentment, fulfillment and peace here. The same is true 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 indulge themselves. They put themselves first but are 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 and feel good but they only cover over what's growing underneath – the spreading black mold of sadness, selfishness and sin. When problems peck at 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.

In his book, *A Place for Skeptics*, Scott Larson tells the story of a woman who discovered God in the midst of her suffering. Annette and her husband were missionaries in Western Europe when she began to have pain in her back. Ultimately X-rays revealed a tumor the size of a grapefruit attached to her spinal cord. They were confident that surgery would relieve her pain.

Something went wrong, however. Annette awakened from the surgery paralyzed from the neck down and in constant, excruciating pain. She, her husband, and their five children returned to the United States to receive treatment and care. Several years later, Annette's husband invited Scott to their home for Sunday dinner.

I had always admired her, having heard how she refused pain-numbing medications so she wouldn't be numbed to all of life. Yet I wasn't sure what to expect from my visit. What I encountered when I entered their home was a woman whose outward expression revealed little of her physical pain. During my visit, Annette shared her story with honesty. When she first came out of the surgery, everyone focused on praying for God to heal her. When that didn't happen and she was confined to 24-hour care at home, she became very depressed. Most people stopped visiting. Their lives moved on while Annette's came to a screeching halt. Bible college had not equipped her to deal with a life tied to a wheelchair and filled with constant pain.

"I felt that I was left with two choices," said Annette. "To kill myself and end the unbearable suffering for all of us or to put my energies to discovering God in the midst of all of this suffering." Annette's face beamed. "I chose the second," she said. "And as I began slowly reading the Bible again through the lens of pain and suffering, what I saw was a God who was familiar with both. I thought my pain and suffering had taken me to a place where God could never be found; instead, it was a place where he became more real to me than I had ever known him to be."<sup>2</sup>

When life pecks and pierces you – put God first.

Discussion Questions:

What kinds of delays do you deal with?

What are some ways you deal with delays?

What does it mean to you to “put God first?”

Why do we let God slip down on the list of our priorities and how we spend our time?

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Larson, *A Place for Skeptics* (Regal, 2005)

Ever faced opposition from someone pretending to be a friend? What did you do?  
When does enjoyment cross over into unhealthy indulgence?  
In what ways can you put God first and seek contentment this week?