

Postal Service Controversy Focuses Attention on the Importance of Letters

The Wired Word

In the News

The performance of the United States Postal Service has been the center of debate on Capitol Hill, with some Republican lawmakers trying to portray the reports of delayed mail, dismantled sorting machines and removed mailboxes as "conspiracy theories." Rep. James Comer (R-Ky.) testified on Friday, August 21, that there have been "no delays" occurring throughout the USPS. Rep. Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) responded by saying, "Unfortunately, this is part of the problem. Some Republicans would prefer to shut their eyes."

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy, an appointee of President Trump, testified that there had been a "dip in the level of service." Prior to his June appointment, changes had occurred including the removal of mailboxes and sorting machines. Other mailboxes and machines were in the process of being removed, but DeJoy has suspended these actions until after November 3. Saying, "We all feel bad about what the dip in the level of service has been," he promised to "deploy processes and procedures that advance any election mail, in some cases ahead of first-class mail." He said that he would not restore the removed sorting machines, however, saying, "They're not needed."

DeJoy focused on "election mail" because the President had said that he wanted to block USPS funding to prevent mail-in voting. "They need that money in order to have the Post Office work so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots," the President said on Fox Business Network. "Now, if we don't make a deal, that means they don't get the money. That means they can't have universal mail-in voting, they just can't have it."

All states allow for absentee voting, in which a registered voter requests a ballot, which is mailed to him or her, and is then returned. This is not the same as "mail-in voting," in which ballots are mailed to all names on the voter registration rolls. Many observers and (mainly Republican) politicians claim that mail-in voting greatly increases the likelihood of fraud and has resulted in chaotic elections when held. Election officials of both parties are actively encouraging citizens to vote by mail as a way of avoiding the spread of Covid-19. Congress is involved because Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution says that the Congress shall have the power "to establish Post Offices and Post Roads." The House of Representatives passed the "Delivering for America Act" on Saturday, August 22, in an attempt to grant \$25 billion in funding for the USPS. As of the writing of this TWW lesson, the bill's future is uncertain in the Senate, and the White House has sent mixed signals about whether the President will sign it.

Financial problems for the USPS are nothing new. For years, revenue has been dropping as people have shifted their style of communication. With the advent of the internet, people began to send texts or emails rather than written correspondence. Bill payment moved online for many Americans. And then the Great Recession cut the volume of first-class mail by 13 billion items over two years, a drop that has not been overcome in the years that followed. Still, the USPS is a beloved institution. A recent Pew Research Center survey showed that 91 percent of people have a favorable view of the post office -- the highest of any federal government agency. The USPS is also burdened by \$160.9 billion in debt, brought on by Congress's 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA). This act ensured that the Postal Service's 630,000 workers would be offered prepaid health and retirement benefits, an obligation not typical for private companies or government agencies. The USPS missed its first payment on those expenses, worth \$5.5 billion, in 2011, and since then the debt has continued to pile up. "That prepayment responsibility that they've been unable to meet has exacerbated over the years," said Cary Brick, former chief of staff for Rep. John M. McHugh (R-N.Y.), a co-sponsor of the 2006 law. "It was bad, and it got more bad and it got worse. But now it's desperate."

Back in 2006, PAEA seemed like a responsible decision. First-class mail volume was healthy, and from 2004 through 2006 the agency made \$6 billion in profits. But first-class mail volume plummeted between 2010 and 2019, and the USPS ran up larger and larger operating deficits. Now the pandemic has caused a loss of revenue because of lower demand for highly profitable personal and marketing mail, which could lead to a loss of \$23 billion over the next 18 months. The USPS is now facing a double crisis: finding money to finance operations, and paying down a debt while running an ongoing deficit. Both challenges point to a need for a government bailout plus continued restructuring of the Postal Service.

In the face of these challenges, the Postmaster General has said that his "number one priority" is to ensure that election mail is received on time. Speaking to the Senate Homeland Security Committee on Friday, August 21,

he said, "As we head into the election season, I want to assure this committee, and the American public, that the Postal Service is fully capable of delivering the nation's election mail securely and on time." He also expressed support for voting by mail (although it is unclear if he meant "absentee voting" or "mail-in voting"), telling senators, "I think the American public should be able to vote by mail, and the Postal Service will support it."

Applying the News Story

Use this recent Postal Service controversy as a starting place for your own reflection -- as a person, as a Christian, and as a citizen -- on the importance and power of letters.

The Big Questions

1. Are you planning on voting by mail this November? Why or why not? What concerns do you have, if any?
2. What is your experience with the United States Postal Service? In what ways do you depend on it?
3. Where do you find particular significance in a letter, either in writing one or in receiving one? What letters have you saved, and why?
4. How have your methods of communication shifted since the advent of the internet? What are the advantages and disadvantages of these changes?
5. In your opinion, why were so many letters included in the New Testament? What power or significance do they have for you?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide our discussion:

2 Samuel 11:14-15

In the spring, when kings go off to war, David sent Joab, along with his servants and all the Israelites, and they destroyed the Ammonites, attacking the city of Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

2 One evening, David got up from his couch and was pacing back and forth on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. **3** David sent someone and inquired about the woman. The report came back: "Isn't this Eliam's daughter Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" **4** So David sent messengers to take her. When she came to him, he had sex with her. (Now she had been purifying herself after her monthly period.) Then she returned home. **5** The woman conceived and sent word to David.

"I'm pregnant," she said.

6 Then David sent a message to Joab: "Send me Uriah the Hittite." So Joab sent Uriah to David. **7** When Uriah came to him, David asked about the welfare of Joab and the army and how the battle was going. **8** Then David told Uriah, "Go down to your house and wash your feet."

Uriah left the palace, and a gift from the king was sent after him. **9** However, Uriah slept at the palace entrance with all his master's servants. He didn't go down to his own house. **10** David was told, "Uriah didn't go down to his own house," so David asked Uriah, "Haven't you just returned from a journey? Why didn't you go home?"

11 "The chest and Israel and Judah are all living in tents," Uriah told David. "And my master Joab and my master's troops are camping in the open field. How could I go home and eat, drink, and have sex with my wife? I swear on your very life, I will not do that!"

12 Then David told Uriah, "Stay here one more day. Tomorrow I'll send you back." So Uriah stayed in Jerusalem that day. The next day **13** David called for him, and he ate and drank, and David got him drunk. In the evening Uriah went out to sleep in the same place, alongside his master's servants, but he did not go down to his own home.

14 The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. **15** He wrote in the letter, "Place Uriah at the front of the fiercest battle, and then pull back from him so that he will be struck down and die."

Acts 21:25

When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters welcomed us warmly.

18 On the next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James. All of the elders were present. **19** After greeting them, he gave them a detailed report of what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. **20** Those who heard this praised God. Then they said to him, "Brother, you see how many thousands of Jews have become believers, and all of them keep the Law passionately. **21** They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to reject Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to live according to our customs. **22** What about this? Without a doubt, they will hear that you have arrived. **23** You must therefore do what we tell you. Four men among us have made a solemn promise. **24** Take them with you, go through the purification ritual with them, and pay the cost of having their heads shaved. Everyone will know there is nothing to those reports about you but that you too live a life in keeping with the Law. **25** As for the Gentile believers, we wrote a letter about what we decided, that they avoid food offered to idols, blood, the meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality." **26** The following day Paul took the men with him and went through the purification ritual with them. He entered the temple and publicly announced the completion of the days of purification, when the offering would be presented for each one of them.

2 Corinthians 10:11

Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

Galatians 3:28

*So why was the Law given? It was added because of offenses, until the descendant would come to whom the promise had been made. It was put in place through angels by the hand of a mediator. **20** Now the mediator does not take one side; but God is one. **21** So, is the Law against the promises of God? Absolutely not! If a Law had been given that was able to give life, then righteousness would in fact have come from the Law. **22** But scripture locked up all things under sin, so that the promise based on the faithfulness of Jesus Christ might be given to those who have faith. **23** Before faith came, we were guarded under the Law, locked up until faith that was coming would be revealed, **24** so that the Law became our custodian until Christ so that we might be made righteous by faith.*