

**Dangerous Distractions**  
**Nehemiah 6:1-14**  
**February 2, 2014**

**Introduction – Distractions**

I've got a problem. And I don't think I'm alone. I'm easily distracted. I keep my Outlook open all the time so that I can readily respond to email. And I'm a slave to it because I'm always eager for news. I can be studying, writing a sermon, or – even worse when it happens – praying. When the computer tells me I've got a new email, I stop what I'm doing and check it out. It seems more often than not, its spam from Proflowers or Menard's. A better man would close up his email until he finishes the task. In my better moments, that's what I do.

It seems like almost everyone claims to have some level of ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder. And why not? Most everything in our culture is geared toward the short attention span: 15-second commercials, blogs you can read in three minutes rather than the 20-minute magazine article, computer games that are so fast-paced, either you act in 30 seconds or you're eliminated. Is it any wonder we are so distracted?

But most things of value require focused time. If you are working on a project around the house – say painting a room – you can't stop every 15 minutes to make a phone call, watch a TV show, or check FaceBook. You'll never finish; or if you do, it won't be a good job. It takes concentrated time and focus on the objective of finishing the task and doing it well. I've been working on writing a book now for over three years. I started the chapter that I'm working on now nearly two years ago. But I've had distractions: a new job, selling a house, moving, buying a house, painting, renovation, and - how can I forget – a new grandchild. I've been distracted.

Have you ever been distracted from finishing an important task? You know, that term paper, that room that needs finishing, the cleaning that needs to be done. There are some tasks that are so important that distractions have the potential of being devastating. That's where Nehemiah found himself in Chapter 6 of our study. He had rallied the troops, started the work, deflected threats, and solved internal problems. Nearing completion in our passage today, the leader faces deadly distractions that threaten to undermine his important work.

**Text – Nehemiah 6:1-14**

Now when Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies heard that I had built the wall and that there was no breach left in it (although up to that time I had not set up the doors in the gates), Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together at Hakkephirim in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm. And I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come down to you?" And they sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner. In the same way Sanballat for the fifth time sent his servant

to me with an open letter in his hand. In it was written, “It is reported among the nations, and Geshem also says it, that you and the Jews intend to rebel; that is why you are building the wall. And according to these reports you wish to become their king. And you have also set up prophets to proclaim concerning you in Jerusalem, ‘There is a king in Judah.’ And now the king will hear of these reports. So now come and let us take counsel together.” Then I sent to him, saying, “No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind.” For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Now when I went into the house of Shemaiah the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel, who was confined to his home, he said, “Let us meet together in the house of God, within the temple. Let us close the doors of the temple, for they are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you by night.” But I said, “Should such a man as I run away? And what man such as I could go into the temple and live? I will not go in.” And I understood and saw that God had not sent him, but he had pronounced the prophecy against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. For this purpose he was hired, that I should be afraid and act in this way and sin, and so they could give me a bad name in order to taunt me. Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, O my God, according to these things that they did, and also the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid.

### **Distraction by Invitation**

The first distraction seemed innocuous enough. The Three Bad Amigos – Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem – sent four letters of invitation to Nehemiah. It kind of reminds me of those phishing emails you get from time to time. You know, “You and the guest of your choice have won an all-expenses-paid vacation to the world famous Hakkephirim Resort on the picturesque Plains of Ono. You’ve been working hard. You deserve it! Click this link to register for free.” So if you’re naïve, you click the link and, BAM! You’ve just uploaded malware that destroys your computer hard drive.

Nehemiah wasn’t naïve. He saw right through their scheme. The Scripture says he knew that they intended to do him harm. So his strategy was to stay focused. “I am doing a great work and cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and come [party with you at the Hakkephirim Resort]?”

This is distraction by invitation. It appeals to your ego. “I’m important. I’ve worked hard. I need to reward myself. I deserve it.” It’s distraction by opportunity. Not all opportunities are good. In fact, they are bad if they keep you from fulfilling your greater purpose. About a year ago, I was approached with what I thought was a fantastic opportunity. Theoretically, it was one that I could have done while still doing my role here as lead pastor. I was asked to consider being the academic dean for a theological graduate school. It was the opportunity of a lifetime. I

was honored to be considered. I wanted it. Bad. Dumb idea. While I toyed with it in my mind, Diane also got into my head. She helped me see that it was a distraction from my calling here as lead pastor. Almost unprecedented in my career, I turned my back on what I thought was an incredible opportunity. Wise decision. The vision, the calling that God has placed on my life here at this time prevailed.

I've seen this so many times with young couples who are getting married. The greater enterprise is the marriage. It is vital that it be healthy and Christ-centered. That takes time to work on hard questions and build up the relationship. Pre-marital counseling should be of the highest priority. And the homework that is required should be faithfully done with great care and focus together. After all, what is the vision? A good marriage, right? But the opportunity that overtakes the focus on the marriage is the wedding. Ironic, isn't it? Couples will balk at spending a few hundred dollars on professional marriage counseling but they will spend thousands, if not tens of thousands on one day. One day that is fleeting trumps a lifetime of relationship. That is distraction by opportunity.

Be wise. Be aware. Opportunities will come. Some of them are good; some of them are distractions from the greater purpose. Learn to say "no" to the opportunities that distract.

We stand in a place today where we could easily be distracted by the opportunity before us. Please hear me on this. And let us be discerning. For thirty years we have hosted a Christian School in our building. And now we have arrived at the day where the building and its use is entirely our own. It needs some renovation. It needs change if we are to be effective in ministry for a new day. But friends, renovation of this building cannot be our primary focus. Our primary focus needs to be becoming the people that God wants us to be – followers of Jesus Christ who live out his Kingdom in this city. We do not yet have a vision statement – and that is by design. I know that goes against most popular business and church growth practices. But we are not led by Wall Street, Main Street, or Willow Creek. We aim to be Spirit-led. And I can tell you that your deacon board is learning to hear and discern the voice of the Spirit. What I do believe, from our study of Nehemiah, is that First Baptist should be the people and place where God's name dwells. It's not really a vision statement, but it is a concept that is deep, biblical, and - if we will embrace it – has the power to deeply shape us.

So let's stay focused on becoming, not a building. We do need to renovate, and we will. But the greatest work to be done is here in our hearts.

### **Distraction by Intimidation**

Nehemiah was wise. He was obsessed with his work – of fulfilling the vision of Jerusalem being the place where God’s name dwelt. He simply brushed the devious invitation aside. The Three Amigos upped the ante. Their second ploy was to resort to intimidation. Every official letter in those days was rolled up as a scroll and sealed with wax. An “open letter” was not sealed so that everyone could see it. It was an insult to send such a letter regarding government business. It was manipulative. We see this all the time in today’s politics. The Left or Right offends the other side. So a distorted and one-sided report is circulated along with a petition to try and raise public outcry against the political opponent. What we do today is no different from the political machinations that have always existed. Of course, the letter that Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem circulated wasn’t just distorted, it was a flat-out lie. It was the same tactic used nearly eighty years before when the rulers around Jerusalem shut down the building of the Temple. (Ezra 4:12-13) It worked then. Perhaps it would work with Nehemiah.

It was intimidation by gossip. Of course, we don’t gossip anymore, especially in the church! You’ve probably never had to deal with that! Unfortunately, the temptation to gossip is ever-present and easy to yield to. It is tempting to spin a story just a bit (that’s a modern way of saying “lie”) to make us look good and another look bad. It grieves me to say that I’m not entirely innocent. Most of us aren’t. But how do you deal with gossip? I think the best way is what Nehemiah did. He simply allowed the truth to have its way. He denied the lie and trusted God for judgment. The intimations of Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were ludicrous. Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the Persian king. He already had letters of authority from the king’s hand. Here’s the key: Nehemiah’s integrity gave him the confidence to stand fast and not panic. Live right. Be honest, without any guile. Pursue God’s purpose in your life, whether it is in the family, school, business, or church. Then you have nothing to fear. Stand in your integrity and turn your intimidators over to God’s hand.

### **Distraction by Fear**

The bad guys’ final ploy was very deceptive. They hired a local prophet named Shemiah. This is no minor detail. Prophets were highly regarded in ancient Israel as spokespersons for God. When prophets spoke, people listened. Of course, the whole history of Israel demonstrates that the words were rarely heeded. But nevertheless, Nehemiah, as a godly man, would have given great weight to the advice of a prophet like Shemiah.

But something didn’t smell right.

Shemiah, who supposedly spoke for God, gave a prophecy that contradicted the written Word of God. According to the Scriptures, Nehemiah had no right to enter the Temple. To do so would be a grievous sin. He would lose the respect of his people and the moral authority to lead them. Of course, his enemies knew that. That’s why they hired a trusted prophet to tempt him. Think of it. A man that you trust, that is held in the highest public esteem is telling you to do

something that you know is wrong. Ironically, the temptation to save his own skin was perhaps the most dangerous distraction of all for Nehemiah.

Shemiah's advice was not only devious; it was designed to frighten Nehemiah. The prophecy is delivered as an oracle – a poem, if you will. Notice the form in the passage:

“Let us meet together in the house of God,  
                   within the temple.  
 Let us close the doors of the temple,  
                   for they are coming to kill you.  
                   They are coming to kill you by night.”

“They are coming to kill you. They are coming to kill you.” You can't miss it. He said it twice. This is a threat designed to scare Nehemiah half to death.

But acting on fear is the opposite of godly leadership. Everyone has fear. It's what you do with it that counts. Acting on the basis of fear is the opposite of faith. Nehemiah had a commission from God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. God's blessing and the progress they had made affirmed God's purpose for Nehemiah. Had he gone to the Temple, he would have forfeited his ability to finish the project – just as Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem had planned.

So what do you do when you're faced with a temptation wrapped up in fear and disobedience? You do like Nehemiah. You know God's Word and you stand firm in it. Stand your ground. He said simply and firmly, “I will not go in.” Be wise. Be discerning. If the temptation is counter to God's Word, no matter how logical it may seem for your benefit, don't do it. You'll lose your moral authority.

It is quite fashionable today for adults who are not married to move in together. In fact, this week Diane checked out a book on household finance out of the public library that suggested that very thing. I get it. It's much more feasible economically. It makes life easier because there's two to manage a household rather than one. I get it. But you cannot then expect God to bless you as you live in disobedience to His commands for sexual purity. And if you have children, well, you have no moral authority to teach them how to live the Christian life. I've been asked many times to do a wedding for folks living together. How can I, as a minister of the gospel, invoke God's blessing on a household that is living in sin? I cannot do it. And the church will not allow me to do it. Separate first and live a life of purity. Then I would be delighted to do your wedding. That's how you build a Christ-centered marriage.

There are times, too, when we are tempted to act out of fear. As a leader, it would be much easier to take the safe route sometimes. Frankly, I would have preferred not to have said what I

just did about cohabitation. But that is not acting in faith. God is not in that so you will not accomplish God's purpose when you act in fear. When David killed Goliath, he refused to cower behind Saul's formidable armor. Instead, he faced his fears and his nemesis with faith, a sling, and five small stones.

### **So...finish**

So how do you do it? How do you brush aside your distractions and finish your task. You do what Nehemiah did.

1. Stay focused on your greater purpose and say "no" to distracting opportunities.
2. Face off gossip with the truth and your integrity. Let God be the referee.
3. Refuse to act in disobedience to God's clear Word.
4. Act in faith rather than fear.

In the end, the Scripture says, "So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul, in fifty-two days." (vs. 15)

I believe the key to it all is knowing and living on purpose – God's purpose. The more I've prayed and reflected on what our purpose as church should be, the more I am drawn to Nehemiah's motivation. Like Jerusalem, I believe First Baptist should be a people and place where God's name dwells. Not only does that apply to us as a church, but it is profound for each of us individually. These are the prayers that have washing through my soul recently:

- May my thoughts be the place where God's name dwells.
- May my words be the place where God's name dwells.
- May my body be the place where God's name dwells.
- May my heart be the place where God's name dwells.
- May my actions be the place where God's name dwells.

### **Invitation to Christ and to the Table**

Now if God isn't in your life you might be saying, "Huh?" But there is something inside of you that cries out for a greater purpose. God made you in His image and your greatest purpose in life would be to live for him – to reflect His character – His name. There's only one way to know God and that is through Jesus Christ. This morning we are going to celebrate the Lord's Table. It is here that we remember His death, resurrection, and ascension. The way to have God in your life is to believe that Christ died for your sin – your rebellion – that you might be forgiven and be reconciled to God. The Scripture says, and you probably know it, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him, should not perish but have eternal life." That is the only path to God. This morning, if you haven't done that, I invite you to trust Christ as we remember Him at this table for your salvation and life.

