

Column

The other day I dropped into Home Depot – it could have been any store – only to be met by a large display of Christmas merchandise. It was something of an awareness jolt.

In my mind I was back in August, but the sight of lights, garland and artificial trees said ‘it’s later than you think’. Halloween is just around the corner, and so is Thanksgiving and Christmas. Where has 2021 gone?

With that being said, no matter where we are in the calendar year, no matter how hectic the pace becomes, for those who follow Jesus Christ, the calling to be about the Lord’s business remains. There are people to be cheered. There is a Gospel to be proclaimed. There are children to be taught and old people to be visited.

Even so, from here on out in 2021, we know there will be many diversions. Activities -- often good things -- will make it hard to keep our focus and stay on track. Nevertheless, we must make the effort.

Diversions are nothing new. They come in all shapes, sizes and from many directions. A classic example is found in Nehemiah. Here, the man for whom this Old Testament book is named is hard at work rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem.

In 586 B.C., the armies of the Babylonians had destroyed the wall, along with the city itself. They had also carried off most of the people of the Southern Kingdom of Judah into Babylonia.

By the time of Nehemiah, almost 150 years later, the descendants of a number of these had come home. The time to rebuild the wall had come. Nehemiah was God’s man for the task, yet he found himself confronted with a number of diversions.

Two local chieftains by the name of Sanballat and Geshem in particular did everything they could to sabotage Nehemiah’s work on the wall. At one point, they sent messengers to Nehemiah requesting a meeting. Nehemiah’s answer was as brilliant as it was instructive: “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down” (6:3).

Sadly, what happened to Nehemiah is no isolated occurrence. Often when we are engaged in some great work, people and circumstances -- Satan, if you please -- will conspire to hold up the parade, will try to get us off course. I know because I have been there many times myself.

When I was a boy in elementary school, I would be placed at my father's desk and told to do my homework. Once the door was shut and I was alone, more times than not, it was everything but homework that got done. Diversions aplenty abounded in the drawers of this desk: slide rulers, rubber stamps, ink pads, fountain pens, etc. I often succumbed to them. I still have problems with diversions.

Again, they come in all shapes, sizes and from all directions. In the weeks between now and the end of the year, we shall be confronted by many. What should be our response?

Why not the response of Nehemiah, 'I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down'?

ALMIGHTY and most merciful God, of thy bountiful goodness keep us, we beseech thee, from all things that may hurt us; that we, being ready both in body and soul, may cheerfully accomplish those things which thou commandest; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the 20th Sunday after Trinity, the Book of Common Prayer)

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