



MEDITERRANEAN MOMENTS

understanding the tapestry of the Bible

Mediterranean Moments: Nehemiah 2:17-20

Understanding the context in which a passage from the Bible is written is important because it helps prevent wrong interpretations, which would result in bad theology and confusion. The context provides the complete meaning of Scripture as it is studied. The English word “context” was developed in the early 1400’s meaning a composition, a chronicle, the entire text of a writing. It comes from the Latin *contextus* which means “a joining together” The word was originally used “to weave together” in such a way that taking one thread from the others would destroy the fabric.

How does this passage of Scripture fit into the tapestry of God’s entire message to humanity?

After the Babylonian Exile, small groups of Jewish captives were allowed to return to their homeland. [Nehemiah](#), who had risen in respect and authority in the [Persian Empire](#), was one of those who dreamed of going back home, back to Jerusalem. After petitioning the King, Nehemiah was allowed to return.

The walls of the city of Jerusalem, along with the structure of the Temple, lay in ruins. Some 130 years had passed since [Nebuchadnezzar](#) had [destroyed](#) the city. The leaders and people had apparently become apathetic to the conditions. It is easy for that to happen, isn’t it? “Things have always been this way. There is no use trying to change them.”

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11) and stayed there three days. We are not specifically told what Nehemiah did during that time, but let’s speculate for a moment. He may have first rested there like Ezra did (Ezra 8:32). Rest should be an important part of the schedule of the servant of God. Jesus once told the disciples to come with Him to a quiet place and get some rest (Mark 6:31). If the spiritual body is going to be sharp, the physical body needs to be well-rested and prepared.

He probably met with the leaders of the Jewish community. He needed to receive their “buy-in” for the project that he intended to fulfill, but it was also important to get their take on what was needed and what opposition would oppose his efforts. He most likely wandered through the streets of the city, getting an idea of its flavor and witnessing first hand where the greatest problems were developing.

the right project at the right time

Nehemiah wanted his project to be the right work at the right time. Success of this nature takes planning. Nehemiah had to assess the circumstance and craft a proposal based on his perception of the problem. There is an interesting phrase in verse twelve of the context of our passage (Nehemiah 2:11-20 ESV). "I had not told anyone what my God has put on my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on" (Nehemiah 2:12 NIV). He used only one horse so as not to draw attention to what he was doing. He did not want opposition before he started his work. Wise leadership knows when to publicize work and ministry, and when to quietly clarify the need and develop the plan.

If there is a lesson for us from Nehemiah, it is this. The positive, faithful nature of one man can become contagious. It was the genuine conviction of Nehemiah that the conditions of the city and temple were a disgrace. He began to talk to other about the plight – but the message was always the same. It started with the fact the hand of God was upon the project. He didn't begin by criticizing the apathy and inactivity of the people, although he surely could have. His message started with what God was doing – gathering the scattered.

Nehemiah was to face many who opposed his work and direction. He perceived his mission as rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem so that an environment could be established for the people where there was freedom and safety to worship their God. Nehemiah wanted to build a location that would be pleasing to God. The walls would serve not only as physical protection, but would nurture a culture that would symbolize boundaries of religious belief. The walls are made complete later with the reading of the Torah – the first five books of Moses.