

Renovator's Dream

Nehemiah



**7 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS & INDIVIDUALS**

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Nehemiah

*by Phil Campbell
& Greg Clarke*

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd. ACN 067 558 365)

PO Box 225

Kingsford NSW 2032

Australia

Telephone: (02) 9663 1478; international: +61 2 9663 1478

Facsimile: (02) 9663 3265; international: +61 2 9663 3265

Email: info@matthiasmedia.com.au

Internet: www.matthiasmedia.com.au

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Telephone: (021) 685 3663

Email: peter@christianbooks.co.za

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How to make the most of these studies

1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

These ‘interactive’ Bible studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. The studies will take you on a tour through Nehemiah, pointing out things along the way, filling in background details, and suggesting avenues for further exploration. But there is also time for you to do some sight-seeing of your own—to wander off, have a good look for yourself, and form your own conclusions.

In other words, we have designed these studies to fall half-way between a sermon and a set of unadorned Bible study questions. We want to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do a lot of the exploration and discovery yourself.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of ‘interaction’—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The Format

Each study contains sections of text to introduce, summarize, suggest and provoke. We’ve left plenty of room in the margins for you to jot comments and questions as you read.

Interspersed throughout the text are three types of ‘interaction’, each with its own symbol:



For starters

Questions to help you think about society and your own experience, in a way that tunes you in to the issues being raised by the Bible passage.



Investigate

Questions to help you investigate key parts of the Bible.



Think it through

Questions to help you think through the implications of your discoveries and write down your own thoughts and reactions.

When you come to one of these symbols, you'll know that it's time to do some work of your own.

3. Suggestions for individual study

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in Nehemiah and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it. You may be spurred to pray again at the end of the study.
- Work through the study, following the directions as you go. Write in the spaces provided.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the *Think it through* sections. It is important to think about the sections of text (rather than just accepting them as true) and to ponder the implications for your life. Writing these things down is a very valuable way to get your thoughts working.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you've learnt.

4. Suggestions for group study

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and threesomes. Get together with a friend/s and work through them at your own pace. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- It is *vital* that group members work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how side-tracked you get!), but only if all the members have done the work and are familiar with the material.
- Spend most of the group time discussing the 'interactive' sections—*For starters*, *Investigate* and *Think it through*. Reading all the text together will take too long and should be unnecessary if the group members have done their preparation. You may wish to underline and read aloud particular paragraphs or sections of text that you think are important.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining important sections of text to emphasize, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of Nehemiah, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.
- See pages 57-60 for 'Tips for leaders' as well as information about further resources to help leaders prepare.

5. Bible Translation

Previous studies in our Interactive Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

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Nehemiah 1 – 2

The promise keeper

For starters

Did you make any New Year's Resolutions that you didn't keep? What went wrong?



Attention house builders, CEOs and personnel managers! Apparently, Nehemiah is the book for you. This Old Testament account of the rebuilding of part of Jerusalem has been variously labelled as a builder's manual, a handbook on management and a how-to guide for getting your employees to do their jobs.

But is it about any of these things?

As you might expect, there is a grain of truth in each of these approaches to Nehemiah. It is certainly about building walls—but not just any backyard fence. These are the very significant walls of Israel's holiest city. And yes, there's plenty in the book about Nehemiah the Leader, the man who convinced a foreign king to let him return from exile to restore his forefathers' home. But to use this book as a company handbook would be to miss the point.

Nehemiah is, in fact, the diary of a disaster. It's the account of the many successes—but larger failure—of one leader to restore holy living among his people. It's the story of how bricks and mortar just

aren't enough to rebuild a nation's heart. It's the account of how Israel, God's chosen people, remained in need of a saviour at the close of what we call the Old Testament.

Nehemiah brings the biblical record of Israel's rise and fall to a close—it is the last historical Bible book before the time of Jesus. It records how Nehemiah left his position as a high official in the court of the Persian King to return to Israel to rebuild the city walls. It tells how those Jews who returned from exile also turned away from their sins and recommitted themselves to the Law of Moses. But, tragically, it also reveals their return to old sinful ways, the ways which had brought God's judgement upon their forefathers.

As we approach this book, let's look back to the beginning of God's relationship with Israel.



Investigate

1. Read Genesis 12:1-7. What does God promise to do for Abram's descendants, and for the whole world?

2. Read Deuteronomy 29:24-30:6. As Israel is about to enter the Promised land, what warning does God give?

3. And what promise does God make?

Israel was given very clear instructions about how to live in the Promised Land. God couldn't have made it more plain. At the same time that he made the promises, God revealed to Israel that they wouldn't be able to keep his word—they would fall short and

turn against him. But even then, God promised that he would “restore their fortunes” if they turned back to him with all their heart and soul. This pattern of instruction, sin, repentance and restoration would occur time and again in Israel’s history.

But at the point where Nehemiah begins, what is the state of God’s relationship with Israel?



Investigate

Read Nehemiah 1.

1. What situation is Nehemiah in as he writes?
2. Nehemiah is written in the style of a diary. What do we learn here in chapter 1 about Nehemiah, the man?
3. Summarize Nehemiah’s request to God.
4. Nehemiah remembers some of God’s earlier promises. What were they? (See Lev 26:33; Deut 30:4; 1 Kgs 8:48-49.)
5. What is the required starting point for Israel’s renewed relationship with God (v.9)?

First the good news

Nehemiah's confidence comes from his understanding of God's promises. When God makes a promise, he keeps it through years and generations. When you know what God has promised in his word, you can be sure that it will come about. This is good news when the promise is that he will keep his "steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (1:5)—but bad news when Israel hasn't kept its side of the bargain.

Nehemiah sets about to bring Israel back to God.



Investigate

Read Nehemiah 2.

1. What does Nehemiah want to do, and why?
2. Why does the King grant his requests?
3. What are Sanballat and Tobiah worried about (v.10)? How do they react to Nehemiah's plan (v.19)?
Make a mental note to watch these two characters throughout the rest of the book.
4. Why does Nehemiah have confidence that he will succeed (vv.18, 20)?

