

*discover*  
**NEHEMIAH**



STUDY GUIDE

*discover*  
**NEHEMIAH**



*CoffeeBreak*





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# How to Study

The questions in this study booklet will help you “do it yourself” and discover together what the Bible says.

Questions are the key to Bible discovery. Through questions you search for the writers’ thoughts and ideas. The questions in this study guide are designed to help you in your quest for answers. You can and should ask your own questions too. The Bible comes alive with meaning for many people as they uncover the exciting truths it contains. Our hope and prayer is that this guide will help the Bible come alive for you.

The questions in this study are designed to be used with the New International Version of the Bible, but other translations can also be used.

## Step 1.

**Read through each Bible passage several times.** Allow the ideas to sink in. Think about the meaning of the passage.

## Step 2.

**Answer the questions** in the “What does it say?” section of the study guide lesson, drawing your answers from each passage. Write answers in your own words. If you use Bible study aids such as commentaries, Bible handbooks, or Internet sites, do so only after completing your own personal study. Answering the questions before the group meets enables you to remember what you have discovered and to prepare for the group conversation.

### Step 3.

**Fill in the “Conversation” boxes** with your questions and thoughts. Include questions that you would like to discuss with the group, topics that you would like to learn more about, and ideas from the passage that have made an impact on you. For example, in the “Conversation” boxes, you might include answers to questions like these:

- What is this passage saying to me?
- How does it challenge me? Comfort me?
- Is there a promise I can claim?
- For what can I give thanks?

### Step 4.

**Have fun** talking with others about what you have discovered!

**Step 1.**

**Step 2.**

**Step 3.**

## 1 Isaiah 1

### Judgment and Justice

**Getting Started**  
The prophecy of Isaiah beautifully reveals the amazing, surprising God who is the Lord of heaven and earth. Let's see what the opening chapter of Isaiah shows about this God, and how he calls his people to live.

**What Does It Say?**

**1. Isaiah 1:1**  
What does Isaiah tell us about himself and his book in the opening verse?

**2. Isaiah 1:2-9**  
What charge does God bring against his people? Describe their situation.

**3. Isaiah 1:10-15**  
In the Old Testament, God set up a sacrificial system that became part of Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord. Animals such as bulls, lambs, and goats would be sacrificed to atone for ("cover over") sin. The purpose of this type of sacrifice was to bring the people close to God and seek his forgiveness. Ultimately the sacrifices pointed to Jesus' death for our sins once and for all (Heb. 10:10; 9:26-28).  
New Moon feasts (usually the first day of the month in the Hebrew lunar calendar) and

Let's talk about...

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# Introduction

Some of the most well-known stories of the Old Testament take place during and after the exile of God's people to Babylon, following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Those stories include the near tragedy of Daniel being thrown into a den of lions; of Daniel's three friends being tossed into a fiery furnace; and of Esther, a young Jewish woman, becoming queen of Persia and courageously speaking up to spare her people from slaughter.

The story of Nehemiah takes place between 445 and 432 B.C., about forty years after the time of queen Esther. In 539 B.C. the Medes and Persians had conquered Babylon, and in 538 King Cyrus of Persia had begun allowing Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding and resettling in their homeland.

The Old Testament book of Ezra describes the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The returning exiles faced opposition from local people known as the Samaritans, but after twenty years the project was finally complete. The city wall, however, remained in ruin.

In the book of Nehemiah we see how God inspires and empowers Nehemiah to lead his people in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Despite the people's weaknesses and sin, God remains faithful and keeps his promises. Through Nehemiah's leadership, the Lord's purpose is to make the city safe for his people again and to refocus them on what it means to be the community of God.

As we study this book, we'll see that Nehemiah serves as a model for leaders still today. His intellect, courage, empathy, and ability to challenge and inspire others, along with his dependence on God and his steady resolve in the face of opposition, provide examples for everyone. In addition, throughout this story we'll see how the God of the Bible controls history and uses people like Nehemiah to carry out his purposes.

# Historical Snapshot for Studying Nehemiah

The book of Nehemiah is one of the historical books of the Old Testament. Because it covers a portion of the history of the Jewish people, it is important to understand where Nehemiah fits into that history.

Abraham was the father of God's chosen people, Israel. God called Abraham to trust and follow him, and Abraham was promised a land that his descendants would inhabit. That promise was not realized in Abraham's lifetime; instead, it was realized after the people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for hundreds of years and God miraculously delivered them under the leadership of Moses. After establishing his covenant with the people at Sinai, in which they agreed to obey the law of God given through Moses (Ex. 19-24), God led the people to the land he had promised them, but most of the people's leaders were afraid to go in and drive out the nations that lived there, as God had commanded. For disobeying God, the people were punished to wander in the desert for forty years. After that time, Joshua led the next generation of Israelites into the "promised land." This was the land of Canaan, in the area of the present-day state of Israel. Members of the twelve tribes, named after the twelve sons of Jacob, Abraham's grandson (also called Israel), were allotted sections of the land.

Conquering the promised land was not an easy task, and it was made more difficult by the ongoing disobedience of the people and some of their leaders. Because the people were often unfaithful to their covenant with the Lord, God sometimes punished them by allowing other nations to oppress them. But when the people cried out for God's help, he raised up judges (spiritual and military leaders) to deliver the Israelites from their oppressors.

Because the nations around them had kings, the people of Israel wanted a king as well. Saul became the first king of Israel and initially led the nation to military victories. But he turned away from God, so God chose David, described as "a man after [God's] own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), to be king in Saul's place. Years later, after Saul died, David became king and led Israel in military victories and in establishing Jerusalem as the city where God's temple would be built. In the Old Testament David became regarded as the greatest king in Israel's history. Though he committed some grievous sins in his day, he confessed and repented of them before God, and the Lord forgave him. David was also a musician and wrote many psalms that show the close relationship he had with God. God promised David that the royal line in Israel would remain with his descendants (2 Sam. 7).



David's son Solomon succeeded him as king and built the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. Solomon became renowned for the wisdom he asked for and received from God, but unfortunately he also violated many of God's commands. He made alliances with nations around him and built up a large harem of wives and concubines, falling into pagan religious practices in the process. Although Israel gained significant power and territory as a nation led by Solomon, the kingdom broke apart during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel split away to form a northern kingdom, and the remaining two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, became the southern kingdom. The northern kingdom continued to be called Israel (or sometimes Ephraim, after its leading tribe), and they adopted Samaria as their capital; the southern kingdom became known as Judah, and Jerusalem remained their capital. The kings of Judah tended to be more faithful to God than those of the northern kingdom (Israel, Ephraim), but eventually both kingdoms were punished for their unfaithfulness to God and sent into exile. The northern kingdom was conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C., and the kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem, was overtaken and destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

The Babylonians took many of the people of Judah into captivity. Most of them were from the nobility and other leading families. It was the policy of conquering empires to take the best and brightest of a defeated population into captivity to prevent later insurrection. The people who were left behind in Judah were mainly poor and destitute and therefore unable to mount a rebellion. They gradually mixed with other captive peoples who were relocated into their area, and eventually they became known as Samaritans.

The Medes and Persians overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., and during the reigns of Cyrus and later kings of the Persian Empire, several waves of Jewish exiles were allowed to return to Judah. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel the governor and Joshua the priest (Ezra 3:2; 5:2), the temple of God was rebuilt.

The story of Nehemiah takes place in 445-432 B.C. during the reign of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Let's discover together how God worked through Nehemiah to accomplish amazing things for his people, and to see how Nehemiah's courage and leadership can serve as important examples for us today.

# Glossary of Terms

**Ammon, Ammonites**—enemies of Israel to the east of the Jordan River, located where the land of Jordan is today.

**Artaxerxes**—King of Persia in Nehemiah's day; Artaxerxes ruled from 465-424 B.C.

**Assyria**—a powerful empire known for its brutality in conquering many nations; the Assyrian Empire overtook the northern kingdom (ten tribes) of Israel in 722 B.C. It was later conquered by the Babylonian Empire, which was conquered by the Persians in 539 B.C.

**Babylon**—ancient capital of the Babylonian Empire, which conquered Jerusalem and Judah in 586 B.C. and took many of the people into exile.

**book of the annals**—a record of events pertaining to the temple; it included various lists of names.

**Book of the Law of Moses**—a book containing the law of God given to Moses, recorded mainly in Exodus and Leviticus; this term often also referred to the whole Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.

**City of David**—a name for Jerusalem, also called Zion after the fortress David conquered on this site (see 2 Sam. 5:7); in Nehemiah's day the southeast hill in Jerusalem was called "the City of David" (Neh. 3:15; 12:37).

**covenant**—a binding agreement between two parties; in the Old Testament era this term referred to God's covenant with Israel.

**cupbearer**—a trusted official who would taste the king's wine to see if it was poisonous before the king drank it.

**daric**—a gold coin used in Persia weighing 8.4 grams and apparently named for Darius I, a leading king in Persia.

**Darius**—the name of at least three kings of ancient Persia.

**Elul**—the sixth month on the ancient Jewish calendar, usually corresponding to portions of August-September on the Western calendar.

**Ezra**—a priest and teacher who led a group of exiles returning from Persia about twelve years before Nehemiah came to Jerusalem.

**Gentiles**—any people who were not Jewish.

**holy**—set apart, often for special service to God.

**Jerusalem**—Judah's capital city, where God's temple was located; it was supposed to be the spiritual center for the whole nation of God's people.

**Joshua son of Nun**—the leader of Israel whom God used to bring his people into the promised land of Canaan (see Josh. 1).

**Kislev**—the ninth month on the ancient Jewish calendar, corresponding to portions of November-December on the Western calendar.

**Levites**—the tribe of Jewish people dedicated to the worship of God; priests were the descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses (see Ex. 28-29), and all others were charged with maintaining the temple and other duties connected with worship.

**LORD** (with small capital letters)—In most English translations of the Bible, this name represents the Hebrew name YHWH (*Yahweh*), meaning "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." God identified himself by this name when he promised to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt and to fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation," said God (Ex. 3:15).

**mina**—a unit of weight equivalent to 50 shekels (570 grams) in the ancient Middle East.

**Moab**—a territory southeast of Judah. Ruth, an ancestor of David, was from Moab (Ruth 1:4).

**Nisan**—the first month on the ancient Jewish calendar, corresponding to portions of March-April on the Western calendar.

**plains of Ono**—an area near the border of Samaria on the northwestern edge of Judah's territory after the return from exile.

**prophet**—one who speaks God's message; a term generally used to refer to Old Testament preachers of God's Word; at times, prophets

also foretold the future as revealed to them by God's Spirit (see Deut. 18:21-22).

**remnant**—the people of God who survived the exile.

**Sabbath**—the seventh day of the Jewish week (Saturday); a day set aside for worship and rest.

**sackcloth**—worn (often with a dusting of ashes) to symbolize mourning and/or repentance.

**Samaria**—the territory to the north of Judah in Nehemiah's day; this was the area occupied by the northern kingdom of Israel before it was conquered by Assyria in 722 B.C.; Samaria was also the name of its capital city.

**Sanballat the Horonite**—the governor or leading official of the territory of Samaria in Nehemiah's day.

**shekel**—a unit of weight equivalent to about 11.4 grams in ancient Judah.

**temple**—the center for worship for the Jewish people, first built by Solomon, destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and rebuilt during Zerubbabel's time as governor after the exile.

**Tobiah the Ammonite**—an official who may have been the governor of Transjordan in the Persian Empire; this territory was to the east of Judah, across the Jordan River, where present-day Jordan is located.

**Urim and Thummim**—the lots approved by God for use in Israel; they were placed in the breastpiece of the sacred ephod worn by the priest of God (Ex. 28:30), and they were used in times of crisis to discern the will of God.

# 1 Nehemiah 1:1-2:10

## Longing for Home

### Getting Started

Tim Keller in his book *Prodigal God* indicates the powerful influence that the concept of “home” places on all human beings. He states that one of the major themes of the Bible is exile and homecoming. All people are exiles, longing for their true home.

In Nehemiah 1 we will be introduced to the main character of the book, Nehemiah, whose name means “The LORD comforts.” Nehemiah had been born in captivity in a foreign land. His ancestors had been taken into exile by the Babylonian Empire, which was now ruled by Persia. As he grew up, Nehemiah became a trusted official in the court of Artaxerxes, king of Persia. News had just arrived from Jerusalem, Nehemiah’s ancestral home, and in chapter 1 we will see how Nehemiah responded to the news.

### What Does It Say?

#### 1. Nehemiah 1:1-4

- a. What do we learn about Nehemiah in these opening verses?

Let’s talk about . . .

- b. Who arrived, and what seemed foremost on Nehemiah’s mind?

*Note:* It was about 765 miles (1,231 km) from Jerusalem to Susa.

- c. What did Nehemiah learn about the state of affairs in his homeland, and how did he react?

For conversation...

*Note:* It may be helpful to refer to the Introduction for what was happening in Jerusalem and Judah at that time.

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## 2. Nehemiah 1:5-11a

- a. What was the content of Nehemiah's prayer, and what do we learn about him by what and how he prayed?

*Note:* Pastor and theologian James Boice, in commenting on this prayer of Nehemiah, points out that it has all the elements of a prayer style taught in Scripture: **A**doration (praise), **C**onfession (of sin), **T**hanksgiving (for all God has done), and **S**upplication (request for God's help and ongoing provision)—often referred to as ACTS.

- b. What request does Nehemiah make, and what promise does he claim?

I wonder about...

#### 4. Nehemiah 2:1-10

a. What do we learn about the relationship between Nehemiah and the king?

b. What questions did the king ask, and how did Nehemiah respond?

c. What did Nehemiah ask of the king, and why were those requests important?

- d. How did the regional leaders respond to the king's letters?

For discussion...

### **Taking It Home**

- a. How do praying and preparing fit together?
- b. Describe a time when prayer made a difference in your preparation for a task.



In the book of Nehemiah we see how God inspires and empowers Nehemiah to lead his people in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Through Nehemiah's leadership, God's purpose is to make the city safe for his people again and to refocus them on what it means to be the community of God.

As we study this book, we'll see that Nehemiah serves as a model for leaders still today. His intellect, courage, empathy, and ability to challenge and inspire others, along with his dependence on God and his steady resolve in the face of opposition, provide examples for everyone. And throughout this story we'll see how the God of the Bible controls history and uses people like Nehemiah to carry out his purposes.

*Discover Nehemiah* features 8 lessons from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. This material is intended for small group Bible study, but it can also be used profitably for personal study. Guides for leaders and group members are available.

The approach to Bible study in this series emphasizes discovery (the reader discovers what the Bible has to say by asking questions and seeking answers from the passage studied). This is an effective and enjoyable way to study God's Word.

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