

NEHEMIAH

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# RENOVATOR'S DREAM



7 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR  
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



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SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

PHIL CAMPBELL  
AND GREG CLARKE



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## » CONTENTS

How to make the most of these studies .....	5
STUDY 1: The promise keeper <i>[Nehemiah 1-2]</i> .....	9
STUDY 2: God the builder <i>[Nehemiah 3-4]</i> .....	17
STUDY 3: Leading by example <i>[Nehemiah 5]</i> .....	25
STUDY 4: Fear of the Lord <i>[Nehemiah 6-7]</i> .....	33
STUDY 5: The water gate affair <i>[Nehemiah 8]</i> .....	41
STUDY 6: The story of your life <i>[Nehemiah 9:1-12:26]</i> .....	49
STUDY 7: When backs are turned <i>[Nehemiah 12:27-13:31]</i> .....	57
APPENDIX: Tips for leaders .....	65

## » HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

### 1. What is an Interactive Bible Study?

Interactive Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you through a particular part of the Bible, helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty 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

The studies contain five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- numbered questions that help you examine the passage and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what this passage means for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

## 3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but also respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

## 4. How to use these studies in a small group

- 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 triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don’t need the formal structure of a ‘group’ to gain maximum benefit.

- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- 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. If you are a group leader, the material in the appendix ‘Tips for leaders’ will help you think through how to use these studies in a group setting.
- If your group members usually don’t work through the study in advance, it’s extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the ‘Implications’ to focus on.
- 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 the Bible, 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.

## 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.



» STUDY 1

# THE PROMISE KEEPER

[NEHEMIAH 1-2]

1. Have you ever made any New Year's resolutions that you didn't keep? What went wrong?

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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 in restoring 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 of 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 that 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.

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## Read Genesis 12:1–7.

2. What does God promise to do for Abram's descendants, and for the whole world?

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**Read Deuteronomy 29:22–30:6.**

3. As Israel is about to enter the Promised Land, what warning does God give?

4. 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 plainer. 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.

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

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**Read Nehemiah 1.**

5. What is the situation for Israel and for Nehemiah as he writes?

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6. Nehemiah is written in the style of a diary. What do we learn here in chapter 1 about Nehemiah, the man?

7. Summarize Nehemiah's request to God.

8. Nehemiah remembers some of God's earlier promises. What were they (Lev 26:33; Deut 30:4; 1 Kgs 8:48-49)?

9. What is the required starting point for Israel's renewed relationship with God (v. 9)?

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## 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.

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### Read Nehemiah 2.

10. What does Nehemiah want to do, and why?

11. Why does the king grant his requests?

12. 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 through the rest of the book.*

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- Do you feel that God will keep his promises? Why/why not?

- In what ways does Nehemiah's prayer demonstrate his good grasp of God's character? How can such knowledge help us in our prayers?

### » Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for being "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments".
- Ask God to help you trust that he is in control of the whole world, including people who jeer and despise God and his people.
- Pray for yourself and for Christians in your church and all over the world, keeping in mind the great example of Nehemiah in chapter 1, that you would be prayerful servants who delight in the fear of the Lord.



## » TIPS FOR LEADERS

### Introductory notes for leaders

**T**HE STUDIES IN *Renovator's Dream*, like all of the Interactive and Topical Bible Studies from Matthias Media, are designed to fall somewhere between a sermon and a set of plain discussion questions. The idea is to provide a little more direction and information than you would normally see in a set of printed Bible studies, but to maintain an emphasis on personal investigation, thought, discovery and application. We aim to give input and help, without doing all the work for the reader/studier.

If you're about to lead your group through these studies on Nehemiah, get ready for a few surprises! The first surprise is that Nehemiah isn't nearly as dull as some people in your group might be expecting. It's a first-person account of determination and intrigue that could easily have you and your group members sitting on the edge of your seats.

The second surprise is that the contents of the book of Nehemiah may differ from what people are expecting. There is a long tradition of treating Nehemiah as the Bible's 'leadership guru'—the Tom Peters or Stephen R Covey of ancient Israel. But a careful reading of the text will show that in spite of Nehemiah's pursuit of excellence, and even though he adopted all seven habits of highly effective leadership, this is a story of failure. The stony walls of Israel were rebuilt, but the stony hearts of Israel remained. The story may climax with a great celebration

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of repentance, but it is followed by a dramatic anti-climax that leaves Nehemiah wringing his hands, and the reader wondering what sort of leader it will ultimately take to change the hearts of Israel.

So what tips will help you effectively lead your study group through Nehemiah? First and most importantly, please read the *whole* of Nehemiah in a single sitting before you start leading your group. Note Nehemiah's noble dream at the start of the book, and weigh up his progress as the story unfolds. Note the glorious threefold promises of obedience made by enthusiastic Israel, and then watch how the promises pan out.

Stephen R Covey says that highly effective leaders will always “begin with the end in mind”. In the case of Nehemiah, that's great advice. Having the end in mind doesn't mean you don't enjoy the process of discovery. Your job as leader is to guide your group through this process over a number of weeks. Enjoy the perseverance of the builders, celebrate the good times along the way, but leave room for a note of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. And feel the frustration at the end of the book that leaves you longing for something more.

Significantly, Nehemiah is the final book in the historical narratives of the Old Testament. It's important that, as group leader, you have a clear grasp of the fact that the whole Old Testament leads us to, and prepares us for, the coming of Jesus Christ. And what better way for the Old Testament story to close than with the story of a leader who almost made the grade, but who couldn't change hearts?

**Phil Campbell and Greg Clarke**

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LIKE ALL OUR STUDIES, THESE are designed to work in a group on the assumption that the group members have worked through the material in advance. If this is not happening in your group, it will obviously change the way you lead the study.

## **If the group is preparing ...**

If all is well, and the group is well prepared, then reading through *all* the text and answering *all* the questions will be time consuming and probably quite boring. These studies are not designed to work this way in a group.

The leader needs to go through the study thoroughly in advance and work out how to lead a group discussion using the text and questions as a basis. You should be able to follow the order of the study through pretty much as it is written. But you will need to work out which things you are going to omit, which you are going to glide over quite quickly, and which you are going to concentrate on and perhaps add supplementary discussion questions to.

Obviously, as with all studies, this process of selection and augmentation will be based on what your *aims* are for this study for your particular group. You need to work out where you want to get to as a main emphasis or teaching point or application point at the end. The material itself will certainly head you in a particular direction, but there will usually be various emphases you can bring out, and a variety of applications to think about.

The slabs of text need to be treated as a resource for discussion, not something to be simply read out. This will mean highlighting portions to talk about, adding supplementary discussion questions and ideas to provoke discussion where you think that would be helpful for your particular group, and so on.

The same is true for the Bible study and 'Implications' questions. You need to be selective, according to where you want the whole thing to go. Some questions you will want to do fairly quickly or omit altogether. Others you will want to concentrate on—because they are difficult or because they are crucial or both—and in these cases you may want to add a few questions of your own if you think

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it would help.

You may also need to add some probing questions of your own if your group is giving too many ‘pat’ answers, or just reproducing the ideas in the text sections without actually grappling with the biblical text for themselves.

There is room for flexibility. Some groups, for example, read the text and do the Bible study questions in advance, but save the ‘Implications’ questions for the group discussion.

### **If the group isn’t preparing ...**

This obviously makes the whole thing a lot harder (as with any study). Most of the above still applies. But if your group is not doing much preparation, your role is even more crucial and active. You will have to be even more careful in your selection and emphasis and supplementary questions—you will have to convey the basic content, as well as develop it in the direction of personal application. Reading through the *whole* study in the group will still be hard going. In your selection, you will probably need to read more sections of text together (selecting the important bits), and will not be able to glide over comprehension questions so easily.

If the group is not preparing, it does make it harder—not impossible, but a good reason for encouraging your group to do at least some preparation.

### **Conclusion**

No set of printed studies can guarantee a good group learning experience. No book can take the place of a well-prepared thoughtful leader who knows where he or she wants to take the group, and guides them gently along that path.

Our Bible studies aim to be a resource and handbook for that process. They will do a lot of the work for you. All the same, they need to be *used* not simply followed.

**Tony Payne**  
**Series Editor**



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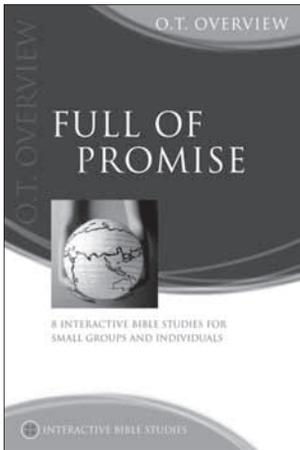
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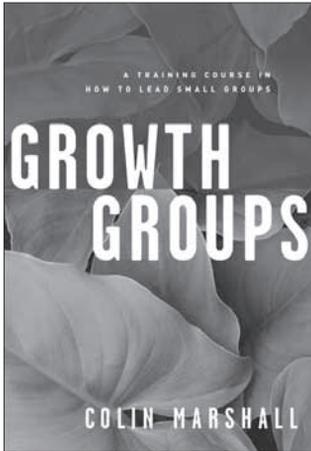
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