

# Nehemiah

## IGNATIUS CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE QUESTIONS

### Welcome

*“You are approaching the ‘word of God’. But for thousands of years, ... the Word of God has been approaching you.”*

The following guide is provided to enhance your reading of the Book of Nehemiah using the *Ignatius Catholic Study Bible*. If you are new to this resource or to reading the Bible, we recommend you read the general Introduction before you begin. It explains what it means that Scripture is the Word of God as well as how we understand and interpret it as Catholics. It also introduces the special features of the Study Bible and tells how they can enrich your reading and study. Additionally, the *Introduction to the Historical Books* will provide valuable context for your reading.

A simple rhythm of prayer followed by reading and reflection is offered below to guide you through the book one chapter at a time. Questions draw attention to key footnotes and word studies to lead you into a deeper understanding of what you read and then prompt you to consider how to apply what you have learned. For a deeper dive, take advantage of additional features as you go: not just the other footnotes but also cross-references to Scripture and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* that are provided above the footnotes as well as any maps, charts, or essays that are not touched on in the questions.

Don't miss these helpful icons as you read! They highlight footnotes that pertain to the Church's criteria for interpreting Scripture (see CCC 112–14):



### Be attentive to the content and unity of Scripture

Notes marked with a Bible icon connect Old Testament passages and New Testament mysteries, fostering appreciation for God's unified plan.



### Read Scripture in light of the Church's living tradition

This icon marks notes drawn from the Holy Spirit's guidance of Church teaching and the spiritual senses of scripture. Here you'll find official teaching as well as interpretations from Fathers, Doctors, and saints of the Church.



### Be attentive to the “analogy of faith”

Explore notes marked with an icon of keys to learn how the mysteries of faith, revealed in Scripture and defined by the Church, clarify and connect with one another in a unified, coherent way.

May God bless you as you read his word!

of God,\* did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,<sup>†</sup> taking the form of a servant,<sup>‡</sup> being born in the likeness of men.<sup>§</sup> And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.<sup>¶</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,<sup>||</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,<sup>|||</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

12 Therefore, obeyed, so now much more in salvation with f work in you, bo pleasure.  
14 Do all th tioning,<sup>15</sup> that y children of God crooked and per

2:9–11: Rom 10:9; 14:9; Eph 1:20–21. 2:13: 1 Cor 15:10. 2

**2:7 emptied himself:** The Greek verb *kenōō* means “empty out” or “render void”. The idea is, not that Christ divested himself of divinity when he united himself with humanity, but that he restricted his rightful exercise of certain divine abilities during his earthly life and accepted certain limitations of the human condition. In effect, the Son of God made himself poor in order to make us rich with his grace (2 Cor 8:9) (CCC 472). • Christ emptied himself by compressing the glory of his Godhead within our smallness. What he always was remained perfect and incomprehensible, but what he assumed was in proportion to the measure of our nature (St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*).

**2:8 death on a cross:** The ultimate indignity. Death by crucifixion was the most awful and degrading form of criminal execution in the ancient world. The Romans reserved it for slaves and insurrectionists. See note on Mk 15:24.

**2:9 exalted him:** By raising him from the dead, enthroning him in heaven, and clothing his humanity with divine glory. A similar destiny awaits all who humble themselves as Jesus did (3:21; Lk 14:11).

**2:10 every knee should bow:** An allusion to the divine oath in Is 45:23. • Yahweh swore that all peoples, to the very end of the earth, would acknowledge his Lordship and bow before him in homage. Paul moves Christ into the center of this prophecy as the divine Lord destined to be revered by all. **heaven ... earth ... under the earth:** The three principal realms in the world view of ancient Israel (Ex 20:4). Homage will come from all creatures great and small—the angels and saints above, the family of man and beasts spread over the earth, and the dead and the demons of the underworld.

**2:11 confess:** I.e., acknowledge. Included in this open dec

serious that we pur sense of awe at ser the prospect of sinn Encouragement con readers that God's g desire (intention) at 21; CCC 308) (CC “work”, he address and trembling”, he good deeds were th not boast of your g within you (St. Augu **2:15 pervers** • Deuterono poetic lawsuit that and ingratitude du

*A Thing to Harpagmos (G in the Greek O Occurrences of “robbery”. Its considerable d the leading vi (1) Some, like “something sel*

## **Prepare**

Read the Introduction to Nehemiah, paying particular attention to *Themes* and *Characteristics* of the book and the *Christian Perspective* on it. What one thing stands out to you, that you would like to remember?

Read the Outline of Nehemiah to get an overview of the book. What are its major divisions?

## **Pray**

Use the following questions to guide your reading of Nehemiah, going at a pace that is comfortable to you. Before you begin each new section, pray simply for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit:

*Come, Holy Spirit, open my heart to hear and receive these words as what they truly are, the Word of God. Enlighten my understanding and give me grace to put what I read into practice in my life. Amen.*

## **Read and Reflect**

Read and reflect on Nehemiah as follows:

- Pray before you read
- Read a section of biblical text by itself
- Read the text again, referring to the notes that accompany the text
- For deeper understanding and to aid in applying what you read, answer the questions that follow. The references at the top of each numbered question correspond to particular notes.

At the end of each chapter, review what you have written and linger where you feel drawn, asking the Lord to speak to your heart and into your life. What do you hear? Respond in prayer and ask his help to live what you hear in your attitudes and actions this week.

# STUDY QUESTIONS

## Chapter 1

### *For understanding*

1. **1:1.** Upon what source do significant portions of the book draw? Why might Nehemiah have kept such records? What does his name mean in Hebrew? How is he remembered in Scripture? What month is Chislev? What year is meant by “the twentieth year”? What is Susa, and where was it?
2. **1:5.** What prayer does Nehemiah’s prayer recall? To what does the prayer of holy men to the God “who keeps covenant” point?
3. **1:8–9.** Which of God’s threats of exile and promise of restoration does Nehemiah invoke? Which one is foremost in mind? What is the place where God’s name dwells?
4. **1:11.** Who is “this man”? What is a cupbearer? What other responsibilities did cupbearers have? How is Nehemiah identified in some manuscripts of the Greek LXX?

### *For application*

1. **1:5.** In what sense can God be described as “terrible”? For whom would God’s presence inspire terror, and for whom would it inspire awe and wonder? How is this description related to the virtue of fear of the Lord?
2. **1:6.** Why does Nehemiah include himself as personally guilty for the sin that brought Israel into exile? What personal responsibility do you have for the sins of our nation?
3. **1:8–9.** Look up Deut 30:1–5. Whom is Moses addressing? Under what conditions will the promise in vv. 3–5 be granted? What exactly is that promise?

## Chapter 2

### *For understanding*

1. **2:5.** What does Nehemiah ask permission to do? For this mission, what will he need? In addition to granting these requests, what does Artaxerxes do?
2. **2:10.** Who is Sanballat? Threatened by the prospect of a refortified Jerusalem, what effort does he lead? Where is he mentioned outside the Bible? Who is Tobiah? Of what province is he probably the governor? What alliance do Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab form?
3. **2:11–16.** What inspection does Nehemiah conduct? To what is his survey limited at this point? Where does he begin, and where does he end?
4. **Word Study: Hand (2:8).** To what can a physical hand refer? To what else can the same noun also refer? In anthropomorphic descriptions of God, what does the hand signify? How does the term appear several times in Ezra and Nehemiah? Most importantly, how is the expression “hand of God” used as an idiom throughout Ezra and Nehemiah?
5. **2:19.** Who is Geshem the Arab? Where is he mentioned outside the Bible? How is refortifying Jerusalem construed, and why is the accusation plausible? What political interest in the restoration of Jerusalem do scholars suggest the Persians may have had?

### *For application*

1. **2:4.** Nehemiah prays before answering the king’s question. If you pray before making a critical request of a superior, what considerations (aside from a positive outcome) might be included in your prayer? For example, how would your prayer include your motives for making the request?
2. **2:8.** The word study for this verse explains how Ezra and Nehemiah use the idiom “hand of God” to describe the influence of divine grace. What expressions would you use to describe it? In other words, with what language would you attribute the outcome of a situation to God’s influence?
3. **2:12–16.** Why does Nehemiah choose to inspect the walls of Jerusalem at night? Why does he keep his mission secret?
4. **2:18.** What approach does Nehemiah use to stir up determination for a project everyone knows will be opposed? How might his testimony help you gain support for a difficult but necessary work?

## Chapter 3

### *For understanding*

1. **3:1–32.** What citizen construction project does Nehemiah organize? How does the description move? Although not all the sites have been identified, what main locations are clear? Who is involved in the reconstruction of the walls and gates?
2. **3:1.** Who is Eliashib? In addition to dedicating the reconstructed gate, what do the priests do?
3. **3:5.** To whom does the title “Lord”, or “lords”, possibly refer? Why did Tekoite nobles refuse to contribute to the building effort?
4. **3:16.** What are the sepulchres of David? How is the artificial pool fed? What is the house of the mighty?

### *For application*

1. **3:1–32.** In describing the reconstruction of the city walls, why is the focus in this chapter on the repair of the city gates? If you were to compare the human soul to a walled city, through what portals would spiritual attack most likely come? How would you fortify them?
2. **3:1–32.** The introductory note for this chapter points out that reconstructing the city wall was a project for “the whole people of God”. According to St. Paul, how is the whole body of Christ built up (Eph 4:11–16)? What is your part in that project?
3. **3:5.** What happens to the building up of the whole body of Christ if some of its members fail or refuse to do their part in the work?

## Chapter 4

### *For understanding*

1. **4:1–23.** What do the regional leaders do about the rebuilding of Jerusalem? When rumors of their treachery reach Nehemiah, what does he do?
2. **4:7.** Who are the Ashdodites? What does the geography of the story indicate?
3. **4:14.** What kind of man is Nehemiah? What does he refuse to do? How is the strength of his character supported?

### *For application*

1. **4:4–5.** What is a Christian response to an imprecatory prayer like this? Rather than pray that God not forget the guilt of their opponents, how did Jesus and the first martyr, Stephen, pray about them? How does their example apply to us?
2. **4:14.** How does fear inhibit progress in the life of prayer? What two things does Nehemiah counsel for those working on the wall? How does his advice apply to the spiritual life?
3. **4:17–18.** According to St. Paul, what are the weapons every Christian should keep at hand for spiritual warfare (Eph 6:14–17)? How are these weapons to be used in spiritual battle?
4. **4:21–23.** Why is continual vigilance necessary in the spiritual battle? In your experience, when is spiritual attack most likely to come, and from where?

## Chapter 5

### *For understanding*

1. **5:1–13.** What weighs heavily on the postexilic community? When do tensions explode? How does Nehemiah intervene? Why is he appalled?
2. **5:5.** What does Mosaic Law forbid Israelites to do? How were persons in this situation supposed to be treated?
3. **5:13.** What does shaking out a garment mean? What does the word “Amen” ratify?
4. **5:14.** In what capacity does Nehemiah serve, and for how long? Although the governor is entitled to sumptuous palace banquets at the local taxpayers’ expense, what does Nehemiah do? Again, how does he show himself to be an inspirational leader?

### *For application*

1. **5:3–4.** On what basis does the Church profess a preferential love of the poor (CCC 2448)? How does she exercise this preferential love? As a Christian, what is your part in that exercise?

2. **5:7.** What are the laws regarding the charging of interest on loans, according to Deut 23:19–20? Although the poor are always with us, how should they be treated (Deut 15:11)? To what was Jesus referring when he said, “The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me” (Jn 12:8)?
3. **5:9–13.** What was the “interest” that the nobles and officials were charging (5:5)? According to the Law of Moses, if someone stole from another, what form of restitution must he make (Ex 22:3)? What level of restitution was the tax collector Zacchaeus willing to make (Lk 19:8)? How does the principle of restoration with interest apply to us today?
4. **5:19.** Nehemiah asks God to remember his good works. According to St. Paul, what gives works their value (Gal 2:16)? With regard to God, what right does anyone have to claim merit for good works? From whom does our true merit arise (CCC 2007–8)?

## Chapter 6

### *For understanding*

1. **6:1–19.** What kinds of opposition did Nehemiah face as he restored the walls of Jerusalem? How successful were these tactics? What does archaeology show about the size of postexilic Jerusalem? When did the city finally expand again onto the western hill?
2. **6:6.** Of what were Nehemiah’s opponents accusing him? Who actually authorized his mission to refortify Jerusalem, and with what did he supply him?
3. **6:13.** Of what is Nehemiah aware? What was the plan aiming to persuade him to do?
4. **6:15.** Which month of the Jewish calendar is Elul? Why is reconstructing the walls around Jerusalem in less than two months an extraordinary feat of human industry? Why are Nehemiah’s enemies rightly afraid?

### *For application*

1. **6:1–19.** In traditional spirituality, what three powers most directly oppose the work of God in human life? In your experience, which of them seems to be the most influential or dangerous? What do you do to counter it?
2. **6:7.** Who was actually prophesying to the Jews during the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 5:1–2)? On whose behalf does a prophet presume to speak? How can hearers determine whether a prophecy is true or false?
3. **6:9.** Have you ever prayed for strength or perseverance in the face of opposition? What form did your prayer take (e.g., recourse to Psalms)? What was the result of your prayer?
4. **6:11.** In times of persecution, what sort of courage does it take to live openly as a Christian? What does Scripture mean by calling the Lord one’s “hiding place” (Ps 32:7; 119:114)?

## Chapter 7

### *For understanding*

1. **7:1–4.** What measures are taken to protect Jerusalem?
2. **7:6–73.** Whom do these verses describe? What is the headcount, and what do some scholars think the number represents? Why does Nehemiah consult this roster? Where does the same registry appear with minor variations?
3. **7:39–45.** Who is listed in these verses? To whose time could priestly ministry be traced back? When were the Levitical ministries of song, sentry duty, and sanctuary service established?
4. **7:64.** What evidence did eligibility for the priesthood require claimants to show? What must genealogical records indicate? When was the right to exercise priestly ministry in Israel denied? What could some who returned from exile be unable to prove?

### *For application*

1. **7:2.** What criterion did Nehemiah use in selecting his brother to guard Jerusalem? If you have authority over others and need help, to what kind of person would you delegate some of your responsibility?
2. **7:7–38.** How much do you know about your ancestry? What resources are available to help you find out? What might a better knowledge show you about yourself?
3. **7:39–45.** How has the shortage of ordained clergy affected your diocese? How has it affected your parish? In your parish, what efforts are being made to recruit men to the priesthood, and even to the permanent diaconate?

4. **7:67.** What value does a choir of trained singers add to the liturgy? How should a choir complement the singing of the congregation?

## Chapter 8

### *For understanding*

1. **8:1.** Where is the Water Gate? Who is Ezra the scribe, and to which family did he belong? What does the scroll of the Torah contain? On what are the directions for Israel's celebration of the Feast of Booths based? In addition, what storyline does Ezra's historical survey in 9:6–37 follow?
2. **8:4–8.** Reading from an elevated platform, by whom is Ezra flanked and by whom is he assisted? How do the people respond? What event does Ezra's action recall?
3. **8:8.** What service do the Levites provide? What did explaining the Torah probably require? In early Israel, whose duty was it to provide Torah instruction? When did Levites assist the priests in this task?
4. **8:13–18.** What feast does the province of Judah celebrate? What does it commemorate? How did participants remember this time? Where are the legal prescriptions for this feast found? In addition, what does the Torah prescribe during this feast?

### *For application*

1. **8:2–8.** What are some of the similarities between this reading of the Law and the Liturgy of the Word at Mass? Why does the congregation stand for the reading of the Gospel? What acclamations follow the various readings?
2. **8:8.** What is the place of the homily in the liturgy? What is its purpose? What is the difference between a homily and a sermon?
3. **8:10.** Read the note for this verse. In times of national or personal mourning, what does Scripture mean by commanding us to rejoice? What is the "joy of the LORD", and how does it become our strength?
4. **8:18.** What is the connection of the Feast of Booths with the mission of Jesus? On the last day of the festival, what did Jesus invite people to do, and what did he promise (Jn 7:37–39)?

## Chapter 9

### *For understanding*

1. **9:6–37.** Of what does Ezra's solemn prayer (according to the Greek LXX) consist? What storyline does the recital follow?
2. **Word Study: Righteous (9:8).** What does the Hebrew adjective *saddiq* mean, and what does it describe? From whom are the righteous thus distinguished? In what settings can distinguishing the righteous from the wicked be done? What sets the standards of righteousness for Israel? How does the Lord show himself righteous? How does Ezra recognize that God is both righteous and just? In essence, then, what is the righteousness of God?
3. **9:9.** What did the groans of Israel in Egypt move the Lord to do? When did a similar pattern of foreign domination and deliverance recur? How does this biblical background loom large in the present context?
4. **9:36.** Why does Ezra remind the Lord that "we are slaves"? Despite returning to their homeland, what do the people lack?

### *For application*

1. **9:5.** The Levites encourage the people to "stand up and bless the LORD". Since the source of all blessing is God the Father, who blesses man, what does the prayer of blessing do when men bless God (Eph 1:3–14; 1 Pet 1:3–9)? How does the *Catechism* describe the movement of the prayer of blessing (CCC 2627)?
2. **9:8.** In this verse, Ezra calls God righteous, a quality normally attributed to good people. What other qualities that highlight his goodness do many prayers ascribe to God? How does reminding yourself of God's attributes help you love him?
3. **9:7–31.** What effect should recalling the mighty deeds of God, both in Scripture and in your life, have on the direction of your prayer? How does it focus adoration and repentance for sin?

## Chapter 10

### *For understanding*

1. **10:1–39.** What does this chapter describe? What do the pledges made by Judah’s leaders in this chapter form?
2. **10:29.** What does “enter into a curse” mean? In essence, what does the oath-taker invoke upon himself?
3. **10:30–39.** What do these verses provide? What did Moses forbid? What do the laws require Israelites to support?
4. **10:32.** What did Moses require for the annual sanctuary tax? Why is the number different here?

### *For application*

1. **10:29.** Are Catholics bound to obey the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments? What is the moral consequence of disobedience, and how is that equivalent to entering the curse of the covenant?
2. **10:31.** How can Catholics imitate this resolution to protect the holiness of days set aside for the Lord? Even if shopping on Sunday is not necessarily sinful, what vice can it encourage, and what virtue can result in avoiding it as much as possible?
3. **10:32.** According to the *Catechism*, what are the precepts of the Church intended to guarantee to the faithful (CCC 2041)? How does the fifth precept (CCC 2043) help to accomplish that purpose?
4. **10:38.** Although the Catholic Church does not require tithing, why should you consider it? How does tithing guarantee observance of the fifth precept mentioned above? In which theological virtue can you grow by tithing and answering other Church appeals for money?

## Chapter 11

### *For understanding*

1. **11:1.** What is the lottery system devised here designed to do? How is Jerusalem sanctified? Where else in the OT and NT is the holiness of the city noted?
2. **11:3–24.** Whom do these verses describe? How is the city peopled?
3. **11:21.** Who are the Temple servants? What is the Ophel?
4. **11:25–36.** What do these verses describe? Where are towns belonging to Judah located, and where are those of Benjamin located?

### *For application*

1. **11:1.** Read the note for this verse. After the destruction of the sanctuary in A.D. 70 and the subsequent expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem, what would have remained to sanctify the city? How is the New Jerusalem, which Christians look forward to, sanctified?
2. **11:14.** According to the note for vv. 3–24, the five verses ending with v. 14 refer to priests. How might the expression “mighty men of valor” be applied to priests in our culture? What sort of might are they called to cultivate, and how can their valor be manifested?
3. **11:25–36.** People of the same religious or ethnic background tend to group in neighborhood or regional clusters. What benefits do some Catholic families receive from clustering together in neighborhood groups? What do they lose by leaving the cluster?

## Chapter 12

### *For understanding*

1. **12:1–26.** What do these verses provide? Who is included in them?
2. **12:27–43.** What do these verses describe? What does the ceremony involve? Where do both groups begin, and how do they proceed? Who forms the train of participants, and which groups do Ezra and Nehemiah lead? With what might the dedication possibly coincide?
3. **12:27.** To what does the term *hanukkah* in Hebrew point? What dedication does that of the city walls parallel?
4. **12:44.** What are the chambers? What are the supervisors in them appointed to manage?

*For application*

1. **12:8.** What is liturgical music intended to accomplish? What kinds of music does the Catholic Church recommend for use in the liturgy? What kinds should be avoided?
2. **12:31.** For what does Ps 48:12–14 serve as a metaphor? How might this psalm have been sung? What message do processions of the Eucharist through the streets of a city proclaim?

## **Chapter 13**

*For understanding*

1. **13:4–31.** When does Nehemiah's second reform come about? After his return to the city ca. 430 B.C., what is he appalled to find? What does Nehemiah, always a man of action, do about it? What pledge do most of these transgressions violate?
2. **13:6.** When did Persian kings assume the title "king of Babylon", and to what territory did they lay claim? For how long do some scholars estimate that Nehemiah returned to the Persian court? If this is the case, when may his second trip to Jerusalem be dated?
3. **13:23.** What does Nehemiah discover, and what does it threaten? When did Ezra work to counter it, and when did the covenant people pledge to avoid it?
4. **13:29.** With what does the infraction of Jehoiada's son sharply contrast? What was the covenant of the priesthood?

*For application*

1. **13:6–7, 11, 17.** Who was responsible for the relaxation of regulations during Nehemiah's absence? What care should Nehemiah have taken before leaving Jerusalem for the king's service? What did Jesus tell his disciples about fulfilling their responsibilities when authorities are absent (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 16:10–12)?
2. **13:11.** In raising a question starting with "why", is Nehemiah looking for an explanation? If not, what does he want from the person he is addressing? How does this way of calling attention to a problem resemble your own approach to correcting an individual?
3. **13:25–28.** What explains Nehemiah's violent action against the Jews married to foreign women (10:30–39)? Does Nehemiah think he is acting unrighteously (13:29)? What does Jesus say about giving vent to anger (Mt 5:21–22)?
4. **13:29.** At ordination, what promises does the ordinand make to the bishop? If the priest violates one of these promises and is removed from active ministry, does he still remain a priest (CCC 1582–83)? How often do you pray for priests?