



# NEHEMIAH

"I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. By night I went out through the Valley Gate towards the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire."

Nehemiah 2:12,13 NIV

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# How to Study the Scriptures

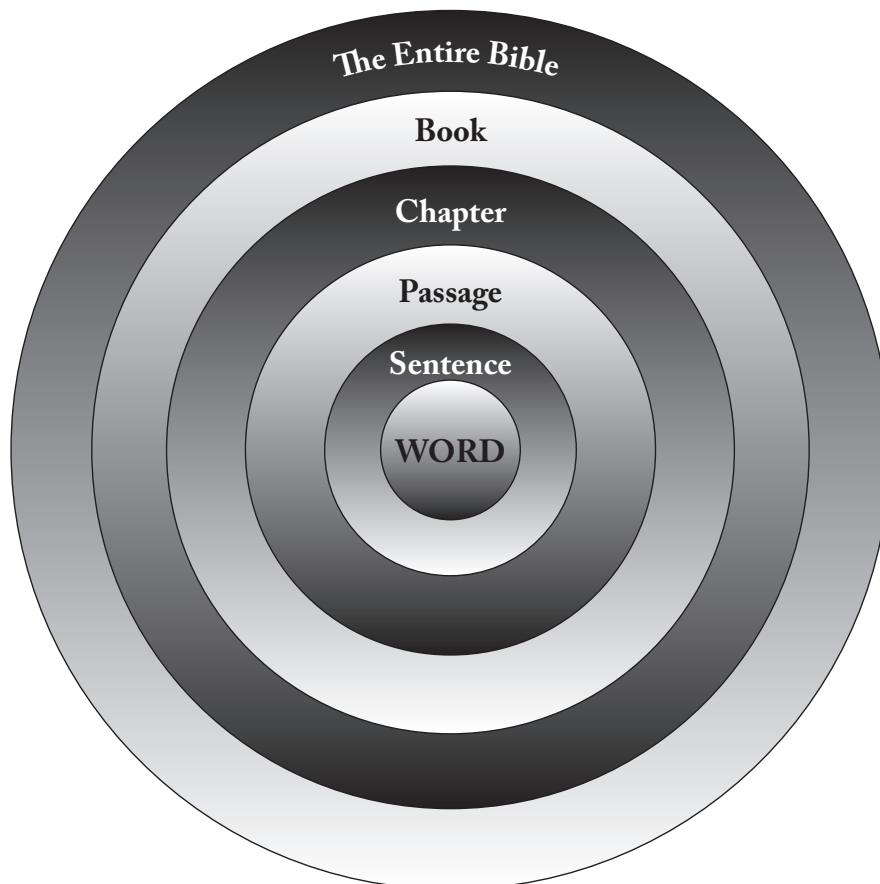
by Brandon Levering

When your eyes hit the page and you read a verse of Scripture, what is the first thing you should notice about that verse? No doubt there are many observations that could be made, but perhaps the most important one is the fact that in order to read that verse, you had to open an entire book to get to it. Individual verses in the Bible aren't floating around by themselves, but are part of a larger collection of books – the Bible. The Bible is the setting in which individual verses are found. Therefore, it is the entire Bible that forms the context and gives meaning to individual verses (or passages or books). This means we must understand how context works in the Bible as a whole. Remember, the book of Nehemiah isn't an ancient document simply floating around, but is part of what we call the canon – that is the collection of books recognized as belonging in the Bible.

## The Concentric Circles of Context

We must remember that our passage only has context within its chapter, and that chapter only has context within its book, and that book within the Bible. Think of it as a series of concentric circles. We start with the innermost part – our passage – and we work our way out. We can learn much here from the Puritans.

J.I.Packer says “the Puritans received the Bible as a self-contained and self-interpreting revelation of God's mind. This revelation, the ‘body of divinity’ as they called it, is, they held, a unity, to which every part of ‘the best of the books’ makes its own distinct contribution. It follows that the meaning of single texts cannot be properly discerned till they are seen in relation to the rest of the ‘body’; and, conversely, that the better one's grasp of the whole, the more significance one will see in each part” (J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*).



# How to Study the Scriptures (cont)

by Brandon Levering

To broaden our understanding of biblical context, we will take a look at several different “layers” of context, beginning with canonical context – how our passage or book fits into the Bible as a whole.

## **Canonical Context – the entire Bible**

The canon is the whole collection of books recognized as belonging in the Bible. Canonical context is simply understanding how the setting of the whole Bible gives meaning to a particular book or passage. Where does the book of Nehemiah fit into the Bible as a whole? What is its contribution to the whole fabric of Scripture?

To understand this, one must begin to grasp some of the overall characteristics of the Bible. Perhaps the most amazing feature is its unified message of the Messiah, or Christ. The story of the Bible could be summarized as the “story of the promised blessing through the promised Seed of Abraham who will come forth in the Promised Land as the promised King/Savior” to establish his promised Kingdom and advance it through his chosen people by means of the promised Holy Spirit until His promised return and the promised end of the age & subsequent glory (Vern Steiner). So how does Nehemiah fit into that story? How does it pick up on the themes and message of the previous book (Ezra), or pave the way for the book to follow (Esther)?

A key tool for grasping canonical context is cross-referencing, or correlation. Here we have God interpreting God. Our best tools are our cross-reference column in our Bibles, a substantial concordance, and, if available, a Bible dictionary. A good approach to canonical context is to view what has already been written as background. The books previous to the one you’re studying serve as a foundation on which your book should be read. Scriptures that follow our book serve kind of like commentary on our book. As Martin Luther said, “the best interpreter of Scripture is other Scripture.”

## **Compositional Context – the book**

Compositional context is how a particular passage, such as chapter 1, relates to the book of Nehemiah itself. The author didn’t write lists of principles to apply or commands to obey, but an intelligently crafted book – a composition – with intricate features that help the reader to understand the authored message. Therefore, when studying a particular chapter, examine how it relates to the chapters immediately surrounding it and to the rest of the book. How does it advance the thoughts of the passage before it? How do the chapters following it advance your passage’s message? What is the overall structure of our book, and how does our passage contribute to it? In understanding compositional context, it is important to consider several aspects of a composition, or book...

## **Thematic/Conceptual**

What are the major themes of the book? Are certain words or concepts repeated? How do established themes inform a particular passage? What is the message of the book? How does the passage you’re studying serve to further these themes and messages?

# How to Study the Scriptures (cont)

by Brandon Levering

## Book Structure

Examine the structure of the entire book. Take time to make an outline – how did God arrange it? Why? What themes does the structure highlight?

## Genre

All Biblical passages have a genre, or literary style, and therefore not all are read the same way. Different genres include poetry (i.e. Psalms), narrative (i.e., Genesis, Exodus, Matthew), wisdom writing (i.e., Proverbs), apocalyptic (i.e., Daniel, Revelation), genealogy (parts of Genesis, 1 Chronicles, Matthew), Epistle (i.e., Galatians, 1 Peter). Since Nehemiah falls into the category of narrative, we'll take a few moments to consider some of its characteristics.

Biblical narratives tell real historical stories, but are crafted in such a way as to mediate God's intended message to the reader. It does not teach its message in lists of principles, or necessarily in life examples, but the message of God is mediated in the story it tells. Narratives create a world within the text, with a way of seeing things – a worldview – that lives and dances across the page. The design and delight of a narrative is to enter into the story and see things the way God sees them – from his perspective. That is, entering into that narrative world so that its worldview becomes our worldview. To hear God's message in narrative, one must enter into the story and live there. The following are some features of biblical narrative – tools it uses to tell a story (from "Notes on Hebrew Narrative: A Short Introduction to Reading Old Testament Narrative Texts." Vern Steiner (Lincoln, NE: The MIQRA Institute, unpublished, 1999)). Keep these in mind as you read through Nehemiah 1.

- ◆ Plot/Structure – The way that a narrative is crafted in terms of its shape or order, so as to convey meaning. As narratives tell stories, the material is often arranged in such a way as to heighten the suspense, or bring the story to a climax. Sometimes other genres, or types of literature, are worked into the narrative, such as poetry or genealogy. Pay attention to the structure of Nehemiah, the crises introduced in the story, and how the narrative is arranged to highlight and resolve these.
- ◆ Point of View – The perspective from which the story is told. Narratives are told from a certain perspective – a "privileged perspective" – the one God has selected from among all others in order to convey his meaning and message. Narratives don't tell us everything that happened, but only what the author deems necessary to get his point across. And each scene in a narrative is told from a specific point of view. Sometimes it is the narrator's point of view, other times it is a certain character's. Notice from whose point of view different parts of Nehemiah are told, and what effect this has on the story. Also, be sure to notice what the author chose to leave out and the effect of these intentional "omissions" in the narrative.
- ◆ Style – Literary devices or artistry used to tell the story. There are a number of literary devices employed by authors in narratives. *Irony* is when expectations in the story are reversed, often unbeknownst to the character but anticipated by the reader. *Repetition* or the piling up of words is often used to draw the reader's attention to certain points in the story. *Dialogue* is another common feature, where the plot is advanced through the spoken word between characters in the story. *Gapping* is a favorite of biblical narrative. It refers to the temporary omission of details or a delay of resolution that moves the story along in curiosity, suspense, and surprise when the "gap" is finally closed (such as whether or not they will be attacked while they build the wall).

# How to Study the Scriptures (cont)

by Brandon Levering

- ◆ Time/Space – The narrative setting of a story and how the story is narrated. There are two aspects of time and space involved in narratives – (1) the time that passes in the story and the space in which the story takes place, and (2) the “time” and “space” used to tell the story. For example, some passages may cover forty years in a few verses, and others may take entire chapters for just a few days. The time that passes in the story is one aspect of time, and the time and space used to tell that part of the story is another. Pay attention to both of these aspects. In terms of “space” or place names in a story, such as Jerusalem, a concordance (an index of the Bible) is a much better tool for understanding the story than an atlas (in other words, focus on what we learn about certain places in a story from what other parts of the Bible tell us about them).

## The Text

This is the part of our study where we focus on a particular passage – the core of the concentric circles of context. What does the passage mean? How is it saying it? Why is it saying it? How does this word relate to that one, and what does God want me to understand and live out?

*In understanding the context of a particular passage, some important considerations follow...*

## Key Words and Themes

What are the recurring words or themes that you see in the passage? How do these themes fit into the message of the passage? How about the book?

## Grammatical Tools

- ◆ Is it a verb (action word), a noun, an adjective (descriptor), a participle (verbal adjective)?
- ◆ How are the sentences structured? Are there comparisons or contrasts (“but”)? Is there a “therefore” in the sentence – if so, what is it there for?
- ◆ What tone or mood does the arrangement of words and sentences present? Is there suspense in the story, tension in what’s being said, praise, surprise, judgement?
- ◆ What does the word mean? How is it defined? This is one of the most important aspects of the text – understanding what words mean and how to arrive at the author-intended meaning.

## Structure

How is this passage structured? How does this structure serve to highlight themes or key words? Look for inclusios – words or themes that bracket a passage (like bookends), which tells the reader that everything inside the brackets needs to be read and understood as a unit (see example above).

# How to Study the Scriptures (cont)

by Brandon Levering

## **Preparation**

Before beginning any Bible study, it is important to remind ourselves again of the nature of Bible study – it is an act of worship. It is proper then to enter into it with an appropriate attitude and disposition.

**Pray.** When considering the nature of the task – seeking God Himself (not mastering a passage) – it follows that if we are to do our task well, God Himself ought to be involved in the process! As John Owen said, “I suppose...this may be fixed on as a common principle of Christianity; namely, that constant and fervent prayer for the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit, is such an indispensable means for the attaining the knowledge of the mind of God in the Scripture, as that without it all others will not be available [will not avail]” (J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 1990). Beseech Him in prayer; acknowledge both your need for Him and dependence on Him, and set about your study with confidence in His faithfulness to meet you in answer to that prayer.

**Check your Spiritual Disposition.** Is there any sin between you and God that you need to deal with first? Are you approaching the God of the Word humbly and prayerfully, hopefully and submissively? Be careful that you’re not just making another mark on your “spiritual to-do list.” “He who would interpret Scripture aright, therefore, must be a man of a reverent, humble, prayerful, teachable and obedient spirit; otherwise, however tightly his mind may be ‘stuffed with notions’, he will never reach any understanding of spiritual realities” (J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 1990).

**Make Time.** Good Bible study takes time. We must slowdown and consider carefully the wonderful truths of God’s Word. We must approach the Scriptures patiently, worshipfully, submissively, reverently and consistently. God is worth it.

**Humility.** All Christians must approach God’s Word with great humility, “knowing they know little, longing to learn more and looking to God himself to open to them his own word” (J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 1990). A key principle to remember when determining a passage’s interpretation is: Never say “definitely” when the evidence only leads you to “probably.” Never say “probably” when the evidence only leads you to “possibly.” And never say “possibly” if there is no evidence at all.

# The Scouting Report



## NEHEMIAH

In order to prepare for this study you must do a scouting report for the book of Nehemiah. Sure you could jump right into it but if you understand what is happening before you look at Nehemiah's story its message will make a lot more sense. The first thing you need to know is that in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew) the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are together as one book. So as part of this scouting report you will seek to understand the book of Ezra. But before you get into Ezra you'll start out looking at the book of Jeremiah. Consider the following questions and passages to discover the background to the book of Nehemiah.

1. Read the following passages and answer these questions. Why were the people of God (Israel) in Babylon? How do you see God's grace in the midst of judgment? What does God promise to his people?

Jeremiah 25:1-14

Jeremiah 29:1-14

Jeremiah chapters 32-34

Jeremiah 39:1-40:6

2. Compare II Chronicles 35:15-23 with Ezra 1:2,3

# The Scouting Report

3. Read the book of Ezra and make an outline of the entire book. After completing your outline answer these questions:

- a. Remember that in the Hebrew Bible Ezra and Nehemiah are one book instead of two. Why is it important to understand what happens in Ezra before you study Nehemiah?
- b. Why does God command His people to rebuild the temple (the message of Ezra) as first priority even over rebuilding the wall (the message of Nehemiah)?
- c. What observations do you make from the book of Ezra? What challenges you from the book of Ezra?
- d. Read Ezra 7:9,10. What is the reason that the good hand of God is on Ezra's life? How can Ezra's example motivate you to study the Scriptures this semester?

"The restoration of Israel, in their regathering to the homeland of Canaan, was important for various reasons. For Israel, it showed that God had not forgotten His promise to Abraham concerning the land of Canaan. (see Genesis 13:15) Hope for a missionary outreach to Gentiles was stirred up in the revival of true worship, for a key mission of Israel was to show heathen nations of the world what true worship of the true God was. And then, the restoration was directly related to the life and ministry of the coming Messiah, in the renewal of the Messianic promises. For example, Bethlehem, Nazareth and Zion were some of the geographical places woven into the promises concerning Jesus' coming. In about four hundred years Jesus would be born of the seed of David in Bethlehem not in Babylon. The Holy Land of promise, not a land of captivity, was where His people would be dwelling when He would come unto them," His own (John 1:11)." **Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament • Irving Jensen**



# A Survey of Nehemiah

**Read** the book of Nehemiah at least a couple of times. Try reading in different translations if you have them or read it the second time online at [www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com).

**Outline** the book of Nehemiah. Look for major divisions in the book also transitional words (like therefore). What would you title the entire book?

**Observe** the major themes or recurring words or phrases. What challenges you from this book?

# A Survey of Nehemiah

## Summarize

- The historical background of the book. Use a Bible handbook, Study Bible, Bible Dictionary, or a commentary. If none of these are available try investigation online at: <http://www.blueletterbible.org/> or <http://www.crosswalk.com/>

- What applications can you make from the book? What areas of application do you need to pay attention to as you study the book in depth?

## Teach

- Make a chart to summarize what you have discovered in your survey. Make it on one sheet of paper. Use the chart on the following page or design your own. The value of such a chart is that it enables you to picture visually the contents and divisions of the book.

- Optional: As you are studying the book of Nehemiah pay attention to Nehemiah the leader. Look at the pages in the back of this study in the appendix to keep track of leadership principles you discover as you study the book.

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# A Survey of Nehemiah

Survey	Book Title:		Author of Book	Time of Book
	People in Book:			Places in Book:
	Theme of Book:			Significance of Book:
Titles				
Chapters				
Key Verses				
Associations				
Themes	Beginning of Book:		Ending of Book:	

# Chronology of Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

(dates are approximate)

538 BC

The decree of Cyrus to rebuild the temple.

538/7 BC

Zurubbabel's expedition to Jerusalem.

536 BC

Foundation of the temple laid.

535 BC

Work on the temple halted.

520 BC

Decree of Darius to resume work on the temple.

520 BC

Ministry of Haggai and Zechariah.

516 BC

Temple completed.

486 BC

Reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) begins.

479/8 BC

Esther crowned queen.

464 BC

Reign of Artaxerxes begins.

458 BC

Ezra's expedition to Jerusalem.

444 BC

Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem.

444 BC

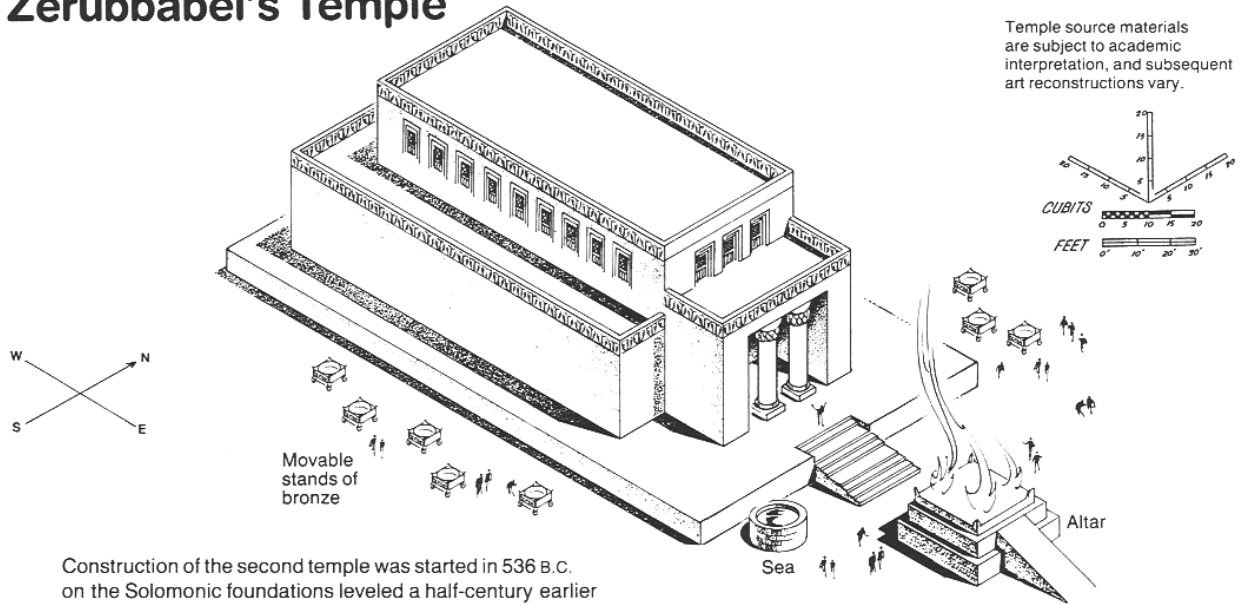
Walls of Jerusalem completed.

420 BC

Nehemiah's second journey to Jerusalem.

# The Temple and the Wall

## Zerubbabel's Temple

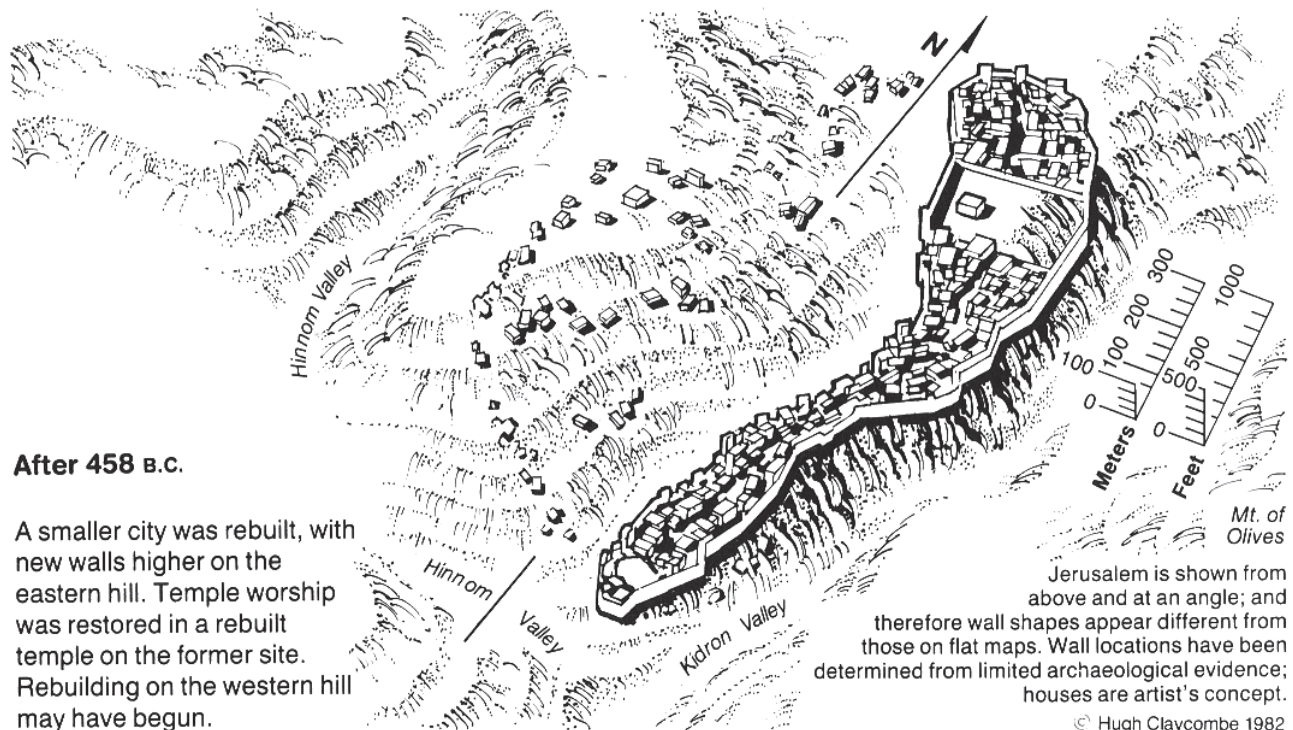


Construction of the second temple was started in 536 B.C. on the Solomonic foundations leveled a half-century earlier by the Babylonians. People who remembered the earlier temple wept at the comparison (Ezr 3:12). Not until 516 B.C., the 6th year of the Persian emperor Darius I (522-486), was the temple finally completed at the urging of Haggai and Zechariah (Ezr 6:13-15).

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## Jerusalem of the Returning Exiles



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What does the passage say? Seek answers to the questions who, what, when, where and how? Look for information like a detective would. Who are the people involved? What happened? What ideas are expressed? Where does this take place? When did it take place? What is the purpose? Are there any key words in the passage? Notice words like “but”, “if” and “therefore”. What insight do they give you into the passage?

## chapter 1 Questions & Investigation

What does the passage mean? Write out questions about what you don't understand in the passage. Are there any words or concepts you need to understand? What is the single primary meaning of the passage? Investigate answers to your questions first by looking in the context and other passages of Scripture. Use other study resources like commentaries and dictionaries if necessary.

## chapter 1

# Illustration

Draw a picture or diagram to illustrate what you have discovered from this passage. How would you teach the truth of this passage to someone else?

# Application

As you are studying the passage pray that God will speak to you about what He wants you to do with what you are learning from His Word. Write out an application below. Consider these questions: What is the truth from God's Word that has challenged you? In what ways have I not lived according to God's Word in this area? What will I do to live according to God's Word? What will be the evidence that I have applied this truth? Who will keep me accountable?

Write down below what you learn from others in your study. What new insights do you gain? What was the major emphasis for them? What are their applications of this passage?

## Prayer Requests

Write down prayer requests from others in your group. If there is time spend some time praying for each other.

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## chapter 2 Questions & Investigation

What does the passage mean? Write out questions about what you don't understand in the passage. Are there any words or concepts you need to understand? What is the single primary meaning of the passage? Investigate answers to your questions first by looking in the context and other passages of Scripture. Use other study resources like commentaries and dictionaries if necessary.

## chapter 2

# Illustration

Draw a picture or diagram to illustrate what you have discovered from this passage. How would you teach the truth of this passage to someone else?

# Application

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## chapter 5 Questions & Investigation

What does the passage mean? Write out questions about what you don't understand in the passage. Are there any words or concepts you need to understand? What is the single primary meaning of the passage? Investigate answers to your questions first by looking in the context and other passages of Scripture. Use other study resources like commentaries and dictionaries if necessary.

Draw a picture or diagram to illustrate what you have discovered from this passage. How would you teach the truth of this passage to someone else?

## Application

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## chapter 6 Questions & Investigation

What does the passage mean? Write out questions about what you don't understand in the passage. Are there any words or concepts you need to understand? What is the single primary meaning of the passage? Investigate answers to your questions first by looking in the context and other passages of Scripture. Use other study resources like commentaries and dictionaries if necessary.

Draw a picture or diagram to illustrate what you have discovered from this passage. How would you teach the truth of this passage to someone else?

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