

NAHUM

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STORMING THE CITY



4 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES

STORMING THE CITY



The Assyrian people living in Nineveh had escaped by the skin of their teeth. If not for the message of a reluctant Jewish prophet named Jonah, they would have faced God's wrath. But God had given them another chance.

Now, just a short time later, the Assyrians are cruelly oppressing God's people again.

So God introduces a new prophet: Nahum. This time the prophet is not coming to help Assyria escape; he's coming to bring "good news" for God's people. But what's the news? Why is it good? And what does it tell us about God and his character?

The short book of Nahum is not only fast-paced and action packed, it also holds much for us to learn as Christians living in a world opposed to God.

Storming the City is an ideal guide to Nahum for individual Bible study or for use in small groups.

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your partner in making disciples

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4 INTERACTIVE BIBLE STUDIES FOR
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 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Storming the City

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» 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 the 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 learned.

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. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, 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.
- 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

We quote from and refer to the English Standard Version, which we recommend. There should not generally be any problems, however, if you are using a different translation (though it might be useful to have an ESV on hand in case of any confusion).

» STUDY 1

CONCERNED ABOUT NINEVEH

[BACKGROUND]

THE OPENING VERSE OF THE BOOK of Nahum helpfully tells us that it's "an oracle concerning Nineveh". We'll get more into that in study 2 (including figuring out what on earth an 'oracle' is). But before we do, it's important we spend some time getting the historical context and learning a bit about Nineveh and why God might have something to say to them through the prophet.

The name 'Nineveh' might ring a bell for you, perhaps because it features heavily in the book of Jonah (of 'Jonah and the whale' fame). Let's just say the people of Nineveh were not on Jonah's Christmas card list. There are two reasons for this. First, Christmas card lists didn't exist back in Jonah's day; we're talking nearly 800 years before baby Jesus was placed in a manger in Bethlehem. And second, Jonah really

didn't like the Ninevites. They were evil (Jonah 1:2), and his own nation and people suffered as a result of that evil. Indeed, the whole point of the story of Jonah was that he took a lot of convincing to go to Nineveh to preach God's warning message to them. But he eventually did, and, much to Jonah's annoyance, the Ninevites repented and "God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). Jonah did this reluctant prophetic work during the reign of Jeroboam II, who was King of Israel from around 790 BC until 750 BC (see 2 Kgs 14:23-25). If you have time, you might like to read Jonah 3-4 to get some insights into what happened in Jonah's time.

You would think Jonah's efforts to warn them might have made the Ninevites more sympathetic to God's

Nineveh and Assyria

It's worth noting that Nineveh was the capital of the nation—'empire' is a more appropriate term—of Assyria. As its centre of power, 'Nineveh' is therefore often used as a way of referring to Assyria as a whole. The Assyrian empire around the time of Nahum was huge and dominant, and, as we will see, they liked to throw their weight around.

people, Israel. But within a few decades, the **Assyrians** were back to their old ways and causing God's people much grief again.

Read 2 Kings 17:1-8 and 17:18.

Note: By this time (722 BC), the nation of Israel had split into the northern ten tribes (Israel) and the southern tribes (Judah).

1. What did the Ninevites (Assyria) do to Israel? What reasons are given for this?

Read Isaiah 36:1-22.

2. What did the Ninevites (Assyria) do to Judah (the southern tribes)? Note: This took place in 701 BC, in the 14th year of the reign of King Hezekiah (see 2 Kgs 18:13).

3. What was the attitude of Assyria and its king (Sennacherib) towards Judah and their God?

Read Isaiah 10:5-12.

4. What was God's attitude and role in all these events?

Building a timeline

LET'S TRY TO PUT TOGETHER a simple timeline of all this historical context that is going to help us understand the book of Nahum.

We know from Nahum 3:8-10 that the fall of Thebes (a mighty Egyptian city conquered by the Assyrians), which took place in 664/663 BC, had already happened by the time Nahum was delivering his oracle. We also know that Nahum is speaking about the fall of Nineveh as a *future* event, and this happened in 612 BC. So ...

782-753 BC	Jonah preached to Nineveh, and they repented.
722 BC	Israel (northern kingdom) is wiped out by, and exiled to, Assyria.
701 BC	Judah (southern kingdom) is conquered by Assyria, but not wiped out like Israel.
664/663 BC	The Fall of Thebes (referred to in Nahum 3:8-10 as in the past).
↓	Nahum delivers his oracle somewhere in this period, having suffered at the hands of the Assyrians for some time.
612 BC	The Fall of Nineveh (foretold by Nahum) to the Babylonians and Medes.
597 BC	Judah succumbs to the Babylonians and is largely exiled to Babylon.

Human responsibility and God's sovereignty

Isaiah 10 is an excellent example of something we see played out repeatedly in the Scriptures: the interplay between human responsibility and God's sovereignty. Although God sovereignly used Assyria as an instrument to inflict punishment on his chosen people, God nonetheless holds the Assyrians (especially the king) accountable for their own evil. The prophet Habakkuk says something similar about how God used, and yet judged, the Babylonians (in Habakkuk 1-2). In Genesis, Joseph said of his brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen 50:20). The apostle Peter points out that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" but was at the same time "crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). The Bible is consistent in upholding the idea that God is sovereign over all things, and yet there is real human responsibility. If you would like to read and think more about this topic, I recommend *The Everlasting Purpose* by Broughton Knox (Matthias Media, 2015).

One of the interesting things you will have noted from your investigations so far is that, while Assyria was an *extremely* evil empire, Israel and Judah were not exactly in God's good books. In fact, God was using Assyria to bring punishment to his people for forsaking him and rejecting his commands.

Yet when we finally get to the book of Nahum—and we will get there eventually!—we will see that it does not speak at all of punishing the sin of Judah. In fact, it promises great relief for Judah through the downfall of Assyria.

It is worth pondering why this might be the case. During the period that Nahum covers (i.e. between 663 and 612 BC), the throne in Judah was filled by three men: Manasseh (until 643 BC), Amon (until 640 BC) and Josiah (until 609 BC). Given that God has chosen to promise some relief to Judah around this time, is it simply that God will not tolerate the horrific evil of Assyria any longer? Or could it be that something has happened in Judah that has led God to decide that 'enough is enough' in terms of his punishment of them?

Read 2 Chronicles 33-34.

(If you are short on time, read 33:1-2, 9-13, 15-17, 21-23; 34:1-3, 8, 14, 19-21, 29-33.)

5. What sort of kings were Manasseh, Amon and Josiah? What influence did they have on Judah and her relationship with God?

6. What was found during Josiah's rule? What does it say about God's people that it had been *lost*?

7. What is Josiah's response to finding it?

SINCE NAHUM DOES NOT GIVE ANY precise time markers (such as naming who was the king at the time), we can't be exactly sure about the status of Judah's repentance as God spoke through Nahum. As you've discovered, under Manasseh and Josiah there were certainly some periods of repentance in Judah.

Nahum's oracle is very clear: God is going to destroy Assyria for their

appalling sin. But do we conclude that Judah's relief is simply a side effect of God deciding to finally punish Assyria? Or is Judah's relief a divine response to signs of repentance among God's people? Perhaps it is both. But, given the short-term nature of Judah's repentance throughout their history, either way we would have to conclude that God is being gracious to Judah.

» Implications

- As a spokesman for the Assyrians, the 'Rabshakeh' was arrogantly dismissive of Judah's God and his ability to "deliver" them (Isa 36:1-22). No doubt he was reflecting the arrogance of the Assyrian King Sennacherib, who had appointed and sent him. Do you know people today who are similarly arrogant and dismissive? Do any of them scoff and mock you for your trust in God and your belief that he punishes sin? What do such scoffers "overlook" (2 Pet 3:1-7)?

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- The God we have seen in this first study takes the massive might and power of the Assyrian empire and uses it as a rod in his own hands to achieve his own purposes. As you look at world events today, how confident are you that God is in control? Why?

» Give thanks and pray

- Praise God for his power, sovereignty and righteous anger towards evil.
- Pray for friends, family and colleagues who arrogantly dismiss God as insignificant and who scoff at the idea that he might judge.
- Pray that you will respond appropriately to hearing God's word as you read through Nahum.