

# GOD'S BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

*Wisdom from the  
Book of Nehemiah*

RAY C. STEDMAN  
WITH JAMES D. DENNEY



Discovery House®  
from Our Daily Bread Ministries

*God's Blueprint for Success: Wisdom from the Book of Nehemiah*

© 2017 by Elaine Stedman  
All rights reserved.

Discovery House is affiliated with Our Daily Bread Ministries, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Requests for permission to quote from this book should be directed to: Permissions Department, Discovery House, P.O. Box 3566, Grand Rapids, MI 49501, or contact us by email at [permissionsdept@dhp.org](mailto:permissionsdept@dhp.org).

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version<sup>®</sup>, NIV<sup>®</sup>. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>™</sup> Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [zondervan.com](http://zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.<sup>™</sup>

Interior design by Michael J. Williams

ISBN: 978-1-62707-677-7

Printed in the United States of America  
First printing in 2017

# CONTENTS

<i>Publisher's Preface</i>	7
1. A Plan for Rebuilding—and Succeeding ( <i>Introduction</i> )	9
2. Don't Despair—Begin to Repair ( <i>Nehemiah 1</i> )	19
3. Don't Hesitate—Investigate! ( <i>Nehemiah 2</i> )	37
4. Don't Be Paralyzed—Get Organized! ( <i>Nehemiah 3</i> )	57
5. Don't Back Down—Build Up! ( <i>Nehemiah 4 and 5</i> )	81
6. Don't Vacillate—Perpetuate! ( <i>Nehemiah 6 and 7</i> )	103
7. Rediscovering God's Hidden Riches ( <i>Nehemiah 8</i> )	125
8. How to Talk to God ( <i>Nehemiah 9:1–37</i> )	141
9. The New Resolve ( <i>Nehemiah 9:38–10:39</i> )	159
10. The Ways God Works ( <i>Nehemiah 11:1–12:26</i> )	179
11. The Sound of Rejoicing ( <i>Nehemiah 12:27–47</i> )	199
12. Report for Duty ( <i>Nehemiah 13:1–14</i> )	217
13. Preventing Burnout and Preserving Power ( <i>Nehemiah 13:15–31</i> )	235
Notes	255

# 1



## A PLAN FOR REBUILDING— AND SUCCEEDING

### *Introduction*

She was an author, a university professor, and a committed Christian. One day, she began experiencing abdominal cramps. When the pain wouldn't go away, she went to her doctor, who said her gallbladder was probably acting up. The doctor ordered tests to rule out anything more serious.

A few days later, while in her office on campus, Kate Bowler received a call from the physician's assistant. The tests revealed a massive tumor. At age thirty-five, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. That diagnosis upended her world. "Cancer," Bowler later wrote, "requires that I stumble around in the debris of dreams I thought I was entitled to and plans I didn't realize I had made." In fact, she added, cancer had "kicked down the walls of my life."<sup>1</sup>

There are many circumstances in life that can knock down the walls of our lives, leaving us vulnerable and afraid. Sometimes the harm we suffer is the result of our own foolishness and sin. But life is also filled with perils we did not cause, from natural calamities to cancer. Regardless of whether the walls of our lives have been broken by circumstances beyond our control or by our own actions, God has made it possible for us to rebuild those broken walls. God wants us to have strong walls of protection in our lives. We can find God's plan for rebuilding the strength of our lives in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.

Perhaps many Christians, if they have given any thought to the ancient book of Nehemiah, assume it has little to say to our lives and our times. Although Nehemiah is one of the greatest leaders and role models in the Old Testament, he is not as well-known as giants like Moses, Joseph, or David. Yet Nehemiah speaks to us across the centuries in ways that are amazingly relevant and applicable to our lives.

In the book of Nehemiah, we discover how to defeat the enemies that attack us from without—and from within. Nehemiah shows us how to build strong walls of moral and spiritual protection around our lives. He shows us how to take the rubble-strewn ruins of our lives and rebuild them into a beautiful, functioning temple of worship to God.

No matter what your circumstances, no matter how far you may have drifted from God in the past, no matter how you may have been attacked and buffeted by people and circumstances, the book of Nehemiah will give you a plan for rebuilding the walls of your life—a plan for success in every aspect of your life.

## **The End, the Middle, and the Beginning**

In 1983, I accompanied physicist Lambert Dolphin and noted Israeli archaeologist Nahman Avigad (author of the book *Discovering*

*Jerusalem*) on a tour through Old Jerusalem. Most of the ancient walls of Jerusalem were destroyed when the Romans, under the leadership of the emperor's son Titus, laid siege to the city in AD 70. Dr. Avigad led us to the top of a section of wall and said, "I have clearly established that this was part of the original wall that Nehemiah built." Words can't express the excitement I felt to be standing at the site where the events in the book of Nehemiah took place.

For centuries before Christ, the Hebrew Bible contained a single book called Ezra-Nehemiah. During the early centuries of the Christian era, that single book was separated by scholars into two books: the book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah. These two books belong together and are truly part of the same story. The book of Ezra focuses on the restoration of worship and the purification of the people, while the book of Nehemiah deals with the reconstruction of the city walls in the fifth century before Christ.

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther all come out of the same general period of Israel's history—and they appear in Scripture in reverse chronological order. In other words, the events in the book of Esther, the last of these three books, took place first. These events were followed by the events in Nehemiah. Finally, the events in the first of these three books, Ezra, were chronologically the last to occur. So if you want to understand these events chronologically, you should read the books in this order: Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra.

The events recorded in Esther took place when God first began to move in the midst of Israel's captivity in Babylon as He was preparing to return the people of Israel to their homeland. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the prophet Jeremiah predicted that Israel would be held captive in Babylon for seventy years:

This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,"

declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (Jeremiah 29:10–14)

The book of Esther opens just after the halfway mark of the seventy years of exile that Jeremiah had prophesied. At a time when Israel's enemies were plotting the genocidal destruction of the Jews, God elevated Esther, a young Jewish maiden, to the throne of Persia as queen. Some scholars say that it was her husband, King Ahasuerus of Persia, who is the Artaxerxes of the opening chapters of Nehemiah.

The heathen King of Persia gave the command for Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem to build up the walls of the city. Perhaps that accounts for an intriguing phrase in Nehemiah 2:6: “Then the king, *with the queen sitting beside him*, asked me . . .” (italics added). Why does God include this seemingly inconsequential detail? Perhaps it is not inconsequential after all.

I believe, and reliable scholars agree, that the queen who sat beside the King of Persia was the Jewish woman, Queen Esther, whom God had exalted to prominence by His grace.

In this book and in the book of Ezra, the Persian king is called “Artaxerxes.” In the book of Esther, the Persian king is called “Ahasuerus.” Neither Artaxerxes nor Ahasuerus are names; they are titles. The title Artaxerxes means “great king.” The title Ahasuerus means “venerable father.” To further confuse the matter, the Artaxerxes of Nehemiah is called “Darius the Mede” in the book of Daniel—and, adding to the confusion, the Artaxerxes in Nehemiah is not the same Artaxerxes mentioned in the book of Ezra.

While some of the historical details in these accounts may be difficult to keep track of, we'll focus on the aspects of these accounts that are clear, understandable, and applicable to our lives today. We will see that God takes the long view of history—and the long view of our lives. Nothing ever catches Him by surprise. He arranges circumstances and events in order to achieve His long-range purpose.

Under King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 586 BC. They destroyed the temple of Solomon and led the Jewish people away into captivity. Nearly five decades after the Babylonian exile began, the Persians under Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon. So, as the events of the book of Nehemiah begin to unfold, Babylon is ruled by a Persian king, whom Nehemiah calls Artaxerxes. His queen is the Jewish woman, Esther, whom God had placed in a position to influence the heart of her husband, the king. We can speculate that because Esther was queen of Persia, the king allowed Nehemiah, his cupbearer (or butler), to return to Jerusalem and begin fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah.

During the Babylonian exile, a small remnant of impoverished Israelites remained behind in the land of Judah. During that time, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah ministered to the people of Judah, urging them to remain faithful until the temple could be restored. Ezra the priest led an early return from Babylon to Israel and began restoring temple worship in Jerusalem. Then Nehemiah, a contemporary of Ezra, led a later return. Twenty-five years later, Zerubbabel would return with about fifty thousand freed captives from Babylon, as recorded in Ezra.

Why did God reverse the order of these biblical accounts? Why are these three books—Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther—arranged in reverse-chronological order? I believe it is because God's priorities are different from our priorities. From our limited perspective, it seems as if the events should be presented in the same order in which

they occurred—first the beginning, then the middle, then the end. But God is not concerned merely with chronology. He is concerned with impressing spiritual lessons on our minds and hearts.

These three books, presented in this specific order, show us the way out of captivity and back to God. The book of Ezra begins with the building of the temple. The restoration of the house of God is always the first step in finding our way back to God.

Next in line comes the book of Nehemiah. The theme of Nehemiah is the rebuilding of the walls. Walls speak of our need for security and strength. In the book of Nehemiah, we will discover how to rebuild God's security and strength in our lives.

Finally, the book of Esther shows us how God is able to use a fully committed believer to achieve His purpose in history. God used Esther to avert a genocidal plot against her people, the Jews, because she was dedicated to serving God, and she was protected by walls of spiritual strength.

This, then, is a brief overview of these three books, showing how they fit together and why their order in Scripture is no accident, but a demonstration of the wisdom and plan of God.

## **Reconstruction and Reinstruction**

The structure of Nehemiah is simple. The book falls into two divisions. Nehemiah chapters 1 through 6 cover the reconstruction of the wall. Chapters 7 through 13 deal with the reinstruction of the people. These, then, are the two parallel themes of Nehemiah—reconstruction and reinstruction.

What does a wall symbolize? The most famous wall in the world is undoubtedly the Great Wall of China. Built over a period of several centuries, it protected the Chinese empire against invasion by the nomadic tribes from the north. The wall stretches along more than 5,000 miles of frontier. It is much longer than the United States

is wide. Because the walls were extremely thick and high, ancient China rightly considered itself safe from invasion.

The walls of Jerusalem were similar walls of protection. Jerusalem was the city of God, containing God’s dwelling place, the temple. But after the Babylonian invasion, the walls were torn down and the city lay defenseless. Jerusalem was weak and unable to protect herself as long as the walls lay in ruins. And so it is with your life and mine.

The rebuilding of the walls pictures the reestablishment of the strength of an individual human life. You have undoubtedly met people whose defenses have crumbled away. They have lost their way in life, drifting in the streets of our cities, seemingly without hope or a future. But God in His grace frequently intervenes in the lives of helpless, defenseless people and shows them how to rebuild the walls of their lives.

The reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem is a vivid picture of the way the walls of our lives, the walls of a church, the walls of our communities, and yes, the moral and spiritual walls of our nation can be reconstructed and restored. Just as physical walls provide strength and protection, moral and spiritual walls provide power and purpose for our lives.

### **“With Salvation’s Walls Surrounded . . .”**

You may have heard the story of an eighteenth-century sea captain named John Newton, who made his living in the slave trade. He made his first sea voyage as a cabin boy at age eleven, was forced to join the Royal Navy at age eighteen, was flogged nearly to death for desertion at age nineteen, and was sold into slavery when he was twenty. During his enslavement on an island off the West Coast of Africa, he nearly starved to death. Newton was redeemed out of slavery by the captain of the merchant ship *Greyhound* in 1748, when Newton was twenty-two.

The story is often told that off the coast of Donegal, Ireland, the Greyhound encountered a terrifying storm. Newton thought he was about to die. In desperation, he called out to God. Moments later, the cargo shifted, causing the ship to stop taking on water—and the Greyhound safely reached harbor. John Newton began reading his Bible and eventually became a minister and a hymn writer.

All of that is true—but it's not the whole story.

After Newton's conversion in 1748, he stopped swearing, drinking, and gambling—but he continued to work in the slave trade. Because of his own experience as a slave, he treated slaves less cruelly than before—but he still treated them as human property.

At age twenty-five, Newton married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Catlett, and became captain of a slave ship, the Duke of Argyle. He later made two voyages as captain of another slave ship, the African. In 1754, while preparing to leave England on his fourth voyage as a slave ship captain, twenty-nine-year-old Newton suffered a stroke. He later recalled, "It lasted for about an hour, and when I recovered, it left a pain and dizziness in my head that continued."<sup>2</sup>

Because of his illness, he resigned from the slave trade and stayed ashore. He later wrote, "During the time I was engaged in the slave trade I never had the least scruple as to its lawfulness. I was upon the whole satisfied with it."<sup>3</sup> While serving as a slave ship captain, Newton considered himself a Christian. Yet he later realized that his initial conversion was incomplete, confessing, "I cannot consider myself to have been a believer (in the full sense of the word) till a considerable time afterwards."<sup>4</sup>

In 1788, more than three decades after retiring from the slave trade, Newton published a pamphlet that shook English society: *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade*. It opened with the words of Jesus from Matthew 7:12 (κῆ)—"All things whatsoever ye would

that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” Newton wrote:

I am bound, in conscience, to take shame to myself by a public confession, which, however sincere, comes too late to prevent, or repair, the misery and mischief to which I have, formerly, been accessory.

I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was, once, an active instrument, in a business at which my heart now shudders.<sup>5</sup>

Newton became one of the most outspoken opponents of slavery in all of England. He courageously committed himself to setting captives free. He mentored William Wilberforce, who led the campaign in Parliament to abolish the African slave trade, and he lived to see the enactment of the Slave Trade Act of 1807, which abolished slavery in the British Empire.

John Newton wrote many beloved hymns, the most famous being “Amazing Grace.” His second most famous hymn, “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken,” contains these lines, which suggest the theme of the book of Nehemiah:

Glorious things of thee are spoken,  
Zion, city of our God;  
He whose Word cannot be broken  
Formed thee for His own abode;  
On the Rock of Ages founded,  
What can shake thy sure repose?  
With salvation’s walls surrounded,  
Thou may’st smile at all thy foes.

Throughout the book of Nehemiah, we will see the importance of being surrounded by salvation's walls. This book speaks to us across the ages, and it still changes lives today.

So turn the page with me, and let's begin our journey. Let's discover God's blueprint for restoring broken walls and building successful lives.