

CrossWise Living | Bible Study Series

The Book of
Esther



Dr. Gail Bones

CrossWise Living | *Bible Study Series*

The Book of
Esther

Dr. Gail Bones

Treasure House Press
Franklin, TN

Dedication

To Ken and Marta Wingler, precious brother and sister in the Lord.

God in his providential care for us gave us lifelong friends at
just the right time. Though miles now separate us,
our hearts are forever knit together.

Proverbs 17:17

Special thanks again to:

Caleb Weeks and Nali Hilderman who I can always count on
for invaluable help with editing and publishing these Bible Studies.

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"In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

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The Book of Esther

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About the Author

Gail Nelson Bones, Ed.D., is the founder of CrossWise Living, a ministry devoted to helping people at all stages in life navigate change through cross-generational relationships. She has been engaging audiences as a speaker, songwriter, and worship leader for over 40 years. Formerly a professor of education at San Diego Christian College, Dr. Bones is the award-winning author of *Living CrossWise: Hope and Help for Navigating Transition* (2013).

Gail and her husband Jeff have been married for over 40 years and together have recorded seven albums of original Christian music. Along with their now-grown children, they spent many years presenting family concerts at churches across the United States. Gail is currently a women's ministry leader at her home church, a worship leader, and doting grandmother.



About the Study

This study in the CrossWise Living Series is an in-depth study of the Old Testament book of Esther. There are 9 lessons in all with six days of questions. Day Six is always optional but can be useful if you wish to spend two weeks on each lesson.

After you have read the passage and answered on your own, you may use the notes on your study Bible to supplement your understanding. Be very careful about information you may find online, however. Stick with reliable sources such as biblehub.com or blueletterbible.org for commentaries containing sound doctrine. Make sure you have a good Bible map or atlas because we'll refer to it often.

While you will be meeting with your group primarily to study the Bible together, an important part of your fellowship will be supporting one another in prayer. You'll find a section to record prayer requests at the back of the book. Since time is likely to be limited for this kind of sharing, try to plan ahead as to how you would like your group to pray for you that week—keep your requests succinct so you can devote the last 10-15 minutes of your time to prayer requests. Remember to record your own prayer request on your list so you can recall and record praise for answered prayer.

Here is my blessing for you as you embark on this exciting journey into God's Word. This is one of my favorite passages in Scripture:

"Then those who feared the Lord spoke with each other, and the Lord listened to what they said. In his presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared him and always thought about the honor of his name."

Malachi 3:16

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LESSON 1

“Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish my purpose.’”

ISAIAH 46:9-10

INTRODUCTION

If you were to start this study by reading the book of Esther in its entirety and looking to highlight every reference to God, prayer, or the Scriptures, you would be surprised to find that there is no mention of anything “religious” in this Old Testament book! And yet, the hidden hand of God is clearly seen in this history of the diaspora Jews who remained in the land of their exile during the time of the Persian Empire. Diaspora refers to a large group of people who share a cultural and regional origin but are living away from their traditional homeland. The Jewish Diaspora is the scattering of Jewish people across the world, away from their ancestral homeland. The diaspora has been ongoing since the Babylonian Captivity and continues today.

Today, Jews throughout the world still celebrate the annual Feast of Purim to commemorate a pivotal time in their history when a beautiful, young, 5th century B.C. Jewish girl bravely saved her people from extinction. Although we do not know exactly who wrote this book, we do know he was a Jew whose knowledge of the area suggests he was a resident of a Persian city. As you will quickly discover, the author was a great storyteller. As a literary stylist of the first order, he records this important piece of Jewish history in a narrative style using irony, contrasts, parallels, reversals, and apparent coincidences to great dramatic effect.

PROVIDENCE

“A coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous.”

The Cambridge dictionary defines a *coincidence* as “*an occasion when two or more similar things happen at the same time, especially in a way that is unlikely and surprising.*” As you read through Esther for the first time in one sitting, just as if you were reading a short story, take notice of this theme running throughout the book.

A dictionary search of synonyms for the word *coincidence* reveals the following: *chance, serendipity, a twist of fate, destiny, luck, kismet, or providence.* These have vastly different connotations. You have probably heard even unbelievers say, “everything happens for a reason.” The big, unanswered question that follows that statement is, “Whose reason is behind what has happened?” I have an acquaintance on social media who attempted to explain a sudden life pivot: “...it was somehow the universe’s way of forcing me to realize I needed to change direction.” Rather than acknowledge the personal God who created the universe, she gave credit to a vague impersonal force instead. This is “*kismet*” which attributes destiny, luck, or fate as words that suggest the universe works without a God. In contrast, we as believers understand from the Scriptures that God is actively working all things together for our good and His glory.

The final word in that dictionary list of synonyms—***providence***—differs greatly from the others. This is the encouraging concept that we as believers hold to be the true explanation for what appear to be *coincidences* or *lucky accidents*. Consider the following definitions of providence and highlight the words or phrases that strike you:

“Think of providence as the hand of God in the glove of human events.”

— Dr. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible*, ttb.org/Esther

“The providence of God is the working of God’s sovereignty to continually uphold, guide, and care for his creation.”

— Paul Helm, the Gospel Coalition: thegospelcoalition.org/topics/providence-of-god/

“Nothing whatever, whether great or small, can happen to a believer, without God’s ordering and permission. There is no such thing as ‘chance,’ ‘luck’ or ‘accident’ in the Christian’s journey through this world. All is arranged and appointed by God. And all things are ‘working together’ for the believer’s good.”

— J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: For Family and Private Use*, pp. 61-62

“The providence of God is the unceasing activity of the Creator whereby, in overflowing bounty and goodwill, He upholds His creatures in ordered existence, guides and governs all events, circumstances, and free acts of angels and men, and directs everything to its appointed goal, for His own glory.”

— J. I. Packer (1926-2020), “Providence” in the *New Bible Dictionary*

“Some providences, like Hebrew letters, must be read backward.”

— Puritan John Flavel (c. 1627–1691)

“The providence of God is our great protector of our life and usefulness, and under the divine care we are perfectly safe from danger.”

— Charles H. Spurgeon, *Sermons in Candles*, Lecture 2

“One of the most comforting truths in the Bible is that the sovereign providence of God extends to the daily details of my life. He’s concerned about me and you. His control extends over all our days, and He is able to work all things together for our good.”

— Dr. David Jeremiah, “First-Person: Trusting In God’s Providence” (2012), baptistpress.com

“To the child of God, there is no such thing as an accident. He travels an appointed way... Accident may indeed appear to befall him and misfortune stalk his way; but these evils will be so in appearance only and will seem evils only because we cannot read the secret script of God’s hidden providence.”

— A.W. Tozer, *We Travel an Appointed Way*

DAY ONE: QUESTIONS

1. Which of the previous quotes did you find most helpful? Which phrases did you highlight?

2. Choose one or two of the quotes to explore a bit more deeply. What are the specific implications for your life based on these truths? Write a prayer of praise and thanksgiving in response.

3. When has God’s providential care in your life been most clear? Can you think of a time others saw merely a coincidence when you knew it was the hand of God working on your behalf?

DAY TWO

1. If you know one verse from the book of Esther, it is probably this one: “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position *for such a time as this*” (Esther 4:14). Another related passage is from 1 Chronicles 12:32, wherein warriors from the tribe of Issachar, loyal to David, were described as “men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” Describe in more detail “the times” in which we are now living. Give some time, thought, and prayer to this as it is the basis from which we start our study of Esther. Read and include some phrases from 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

2. The book of Esther is a literary gem—the unnamed author uses many elements of great storytelling in recording this important history of the Jewish people. One such element is called “chiastic structure” (from the word “cross”). This is when an idea is developed and then paralleled in reverse order. A simple example would be Jesus words in Mark 2:27, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.”

Chiastic structure can go further in that it can also describe the mirroring of an entire plot. Jen Wilkin explains:

“...most chiastic structures are longer than one line, sometimes stretching across entire chapters, with a hinge point in the middle. Westerners are accustomed to a conclusion landing at the end, like the moral of the story or the punchline of a joke, but the ancient Near Eastern mind liked to embed the main idea dead center.”

If we don’t recognize this structure as we read Scripture, from the Psalms to the words of Jesus, we risk placing the emphasis on the wrong point. As a Bible teacher, I see how chiasms honor the truism that repetition is the mother of learning. Chiasms are memory aids, God’s kindness to past generations of worshipers who likely never held Scripture in their hands as well as to modern Christians in our distracted age. They are meant to help us remember.”

— Jen Wilkin, “A Life’s Faithful Symmetry”, *Christianity Today*, January/February 2025

In our current study, we will see intentional symmetry in that Esther begins and ends with a banquet. The first chapters describe the rise of the villain Haman and the looming demise of Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people. In the center of the book, the pivot point occurs, and we see God’s work on behalf of his people to bring about the destruction of the evil Haman, the preservation of the Jewish people and the exaltation of Mordecai with a banquet in his honor. This structure emphasizes that even when the events in life seem chaotic, God is working behind the scenes working His sovereign plan for our good and His glory. Through this book of the Bible that reads like an exciting short story we are going to learn much about the character of God and find encouragement that His hidden hand is always at work.

As we read books in the Old Testament we are rewarded by a richer understanding of the New Testament as we are challenged to do further research into varying literary styles, historical details, and ancient cultural practices. How do the following verses help motivate us to devote ourselves to studying each book of the Bible, both New and Old Testaments? What is promised as a result?

Romans 15:4

1 Corinthians 10:11

3. The only two books of the Bible named after women, Ruth and Esther, are thematically related in that the “hidden hand of God” is vividly portrayed in the lives of their characters. Esther is notable because it never mentions God or prayer or the Torah. At first glance, it might appear to be a secular rather than sacred history. Esther, however, has a prominent place in the Hebrew Scriptures, explaining the events behind the Feast of Purim and celebrating God’s preservation of His chosen people. Before we begin to read the book of Esther, give some thought to how the “hidden hand of God” was working behind the scenes in your life to bring you into a personal relationship with Him.
 - a. Are there certain markers in your life—people or events—that lead you to Christ before you were even aware of it?
 - b. Identify the areas of your life now where you are looking for God’s hand to work on your behalf. Where do you need his hand of mercy?
 - c. Where do you need to see that behind chaos, there is a God ordering the events of the universe?
 - d. Where do you need to see His faithfulness? In what spheres of your life currently is it vital for you to recognize His sovereignty and providential care for you?

DAY THREE

1. C.S. Lewis wrote about the role of chance or coincidence versus God's providence in our lives. Highlight and then make a personal response to this quote in the space below it:

*"In friendship...we think we have chosen our peers. In reality a few years' difference in the dates of our births, a few more miles between certain houses, the choice of one university instead of another...the accident of a topic being raised or not raised at a first meeting—any of these chances might have kept us apart. But, for a Christian, there are, strictly speaking no chances. A secret master of ceremonies has been at work. Christ, who said to the disciples, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you," can truly say to every group of Christian friends, "Ye have not chosen one another but I have chosen you for one another." The friendship is not a reward for our discriminating and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each of us the beauties of others." — C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves**

2. It should be clear that it is not by accident that you are part of this study group at this specific moment in your life with these specific fellow travelers. I am thanking God in advance for the joy we will find in this journey together! As we set out on our study of God's providence as evidenced in Esther, these theological questions and answers from the Heidelberg Catechism should prove inspiring. Most of us will be familiar with this famous quote from the Heidelberg Shorter Catechism:

Question #1: What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Write a prayer of praise and thanksgiving in response to the truths from the Heidelberg Catechism explained below in question and answer form. In your response, try to include some details from your own life.

- a. *Question #27: What is the Providence of God? It is the almighty and everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were, by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.*

- b. *Question #28: And why should we study this? What good will it do?* That we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and for what is future have good confidence in our faithful God and Father that no creature shall separate us from his love, since all creatures are so in his hand that without his will they cannot so much as move.

3. The most definitive explanation of God's providence, however, are Jesus' own words: "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father's care" (Matthew 10:29). Do you think Jesus means for us to take this literally, or is this hyperbole? What are the implications?

DAY FOUR

Today we will get some practice in using Bible Study tools readily available on the Internet that you can use to research the topic of God's providence. Feel free to use these tools at any time during this study to help with your understanding.

Here was my starting point: A giant hardback volume I have on my shelf, *The NIV Complete Concordance*, showed only one direct use of *providence* in Job 10:12: "You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit." From there I turned to some free internet resources to expand my search. Follow along with the steps below:

1. Go to biblehub.com and type Job 10:12 in the search box at the top. This will display a listing of this verse as it appears in various translations. Read through these translations. What are some of the other words used to express "providence"?
2. On the right side of the page, you will find Cross-References. Read through these and choose one to write out below.
3. Go to the top of the internet page you are on for Job 10:12 and click the link in the white bar marked "Interlin" (this stands for "interlinear"). As you review your passage, it will show you several things (from top to bottom): the Strong's Lexicon number (i.e. #6486), a phonetic pronunciation of the word in the original language, the actual word in the alphabet of the original language, the word's meaning, and the part of speech (noun, verb, conjunction, preposition, etc.). What is a simplified version of the meaning that you find here?
4. Next, click on the blue number (#6486) you see on top of the entry—this will link you to Strong's Lexicon where you will find a lot of detail on the way this word is used in other portions of Scripture. You will see the word "*pequddah*." Scroll down a bit and read the paragraphs marked *Usage* and *Cultural and Historical Background*. Summarize what you learn about God's providential care for his people from what you read here.
5. How has this bit of extra study helped expand your understanding of who God is and how He works in our lives?

6. Take a moment and explore the other tabs in that white bar. For example, click the tab marked *Visuals*. See if you can figure out how to copy and paste this verse on one of the visuals and post it in your Facebook Group or send it to a friend.
7. Consider one final quotation attributed to St. Augustine: *“Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.”*
 - a. Review places in your past where you have to remind yourself of God’s mercy. What can you thank God for in this regard?

b. Where do you have to rely on God’s love to guide your path in the present?

c. What are your concerns about your future? How does it help to rely on Go’s providence?

DAY FIVE

1. Another term closely associated with providence is “sovereignty.” In our study of Esther, we will also be looking at evidence of the sovereignty of God, which is His ultimate power and authority to do whatever He wills. Providence refers to God’s active, purposeful governance and care over creation. Providence is how He carries out His sovereign will in the world. Providence is God’s active involvement in managing and directing the events in the world according to His plan.

As John Piper puts it, “When we say God is sovereign, we mean he is powerful and authoritative to the extent of being able to override all other powers and authorities...Nothing can successfully stop any act or any event or design or purpose that God intends to certainly bring about.”

A.W. Tozer in *The Knowledge of the Holy* writes, “God sovereignly decreed that man should be free to exercise moral choice, and man from the beginning has fulfilled that decree by making his choice between good and evil. When he chooses to do evil, he does not thereby countervail the sovereign will of God but fulfills it, inasmuch as the eternal decree decided not which choice the man should make but that he should be free to make it. If in His absolute freedom God has willed to give man limited freedom, who is there to stay His hand or say, 'What doest thou?' Man’s will is free because God is sovereign. A God less than sovereign could not bestow moral freedom upon His creatures. He would be afraid to do so.”

Can you summarize and simplify the two quotes above?

2. Before we start our verse by verse study of the entire book of Esther, we will begin by establishing a firm biblical foundation for the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. It will be helpful to have the scriptural basis for this doctrine well-established in your heart and mind as we look for it in the story of Esther.

For each verse below, for Part A, write out key phrases regarding God’s sovereignty. In order to really absorb and internalize the Bible, do not just cut and paste the text, but write or type these scriptural passages (or phrases from them) out in the spaces below. For Part B, write out the implications for your life.

- i. Genesis 45:5-7 with Genesis 50:20

A.

B.

ii. Isaiah 45:7

A.

B.

iii. Isaiah 46:10

A.

B.

iv. 1 Chronicles 29:11-12

A.

B.

v. Psalm 139:13-16

A.

B.

vi. Proverbs 16:9

A.

B.

vii. Proverbs 19:21

A.

B.

viii. Romans 8:28-29

A.

B.

DAY SIX

Worship the Lord by singing, reciting or listening to the words of this hymn. Underline key phrases that spoke to you today. Highlight passages that may remind you of details in the story of Esther.

O God, Our Help in Ages Past Isaac Watts (1719)

1. O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home!
2. Under the shadow of your throne
your saints have dwelt secure;
sufficient is your arm alone,
and our defense is sure.
3. Before the hills in order stood,
or earth received its frame,
from everlasting you are God,
to endless years the same.
4. A thousand ages in your sight
are like an evening gone,
short as the watch that ends the night
before the rising sun.
5. Time, like an ever-rolling stream,
soon bears us all away;
we fly forgotten, as a dream
dies at the op'ning day.
6. O God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come,
still be our guard while troubles last,
and our eternal home!

WEEKLY REVIEW

1. What have you learned about the character of God this week?
2. What have you learned about yourself this week? How have you been able to apply what you learned?
3. What is an important principle or truth you want to remember from this week?
4. What comment or insight during the discussion was helpful?

About CrossWise Living Resources

CrossWise Living is a ministry devoted to helping people at all stages in life navigate change through cross-generational relationships. Anchored by the work of Dr. Gail Bones, the ministry has been commended by Christian authors, leaders and ministry directors including Pam Farrel, Wayne Rice, Leanna Tankersley, Virginia Friesen, Lynn Vincent, Mark Buchanan and many others through the years. Our discipleship resources promote intergenerational ministry and mentoring relationships.

The foundational concepts of CrossWise Living include: 1) Looking *up* to God for specific guidance, 2) Reaching out to those who have gone *before* us, 3) Reaching out to those who are coming *behind* us, and 4) Looking *down (inward)* in self-reflection about the practical details of our lives. Our flagship 12-week study, *Living CrossWise: Hope and Help for Navigating Transition*, is a thoughtful, Biblically-rooted resource that examines the uprooting, disorienting nature of change, loss and new growth in our lives. By combining metaphors from sailing with stories about life's transitions and topical Bible study, it teaches readers how to harness the power of the winds of change that propel us forward on a zigzag course through life's transitions.

Flagship Study: *Living CrossWise* Hope & Help for Navigating Transition

Includes a 12-week companion Bible Study and a Leader's Guide

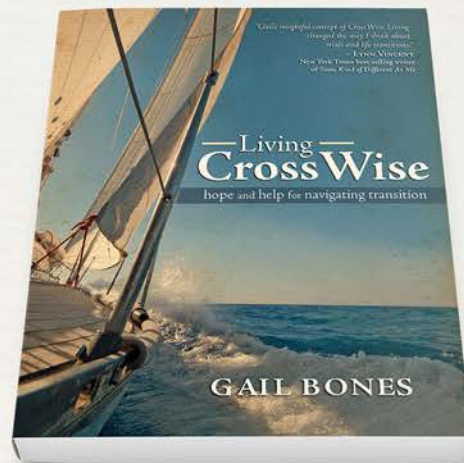
As relentless as the waves of the sea, times of transition challenge us. How can you find God's power to chart your course and move forward in the face of constant change?

"Gail's insightful concept of CrossWise Living changed the way I think about trials and difficult life transitions."

— LYNN VINCENT, New York Times best-selling writer of *Same Kind of Different As Me*

"If life is an ocean, then Gail Bones has not so much written a book as reinvented the art of seafaring. From the depths of her own loss and disappointment, from the midst of her own rough seas, she's emerged with skill, resolve, courage and insight—and humor intact—and distilled it all in these pages. This book is at once a map, a compass, a manual, and a whole boatload of supplies, all guaranteed to get you to the other side."

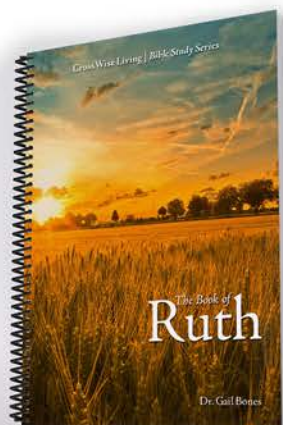
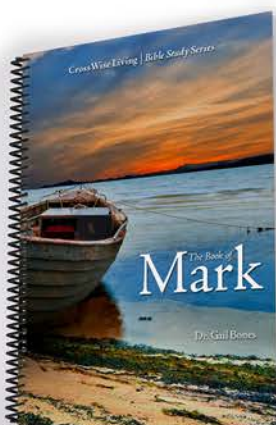
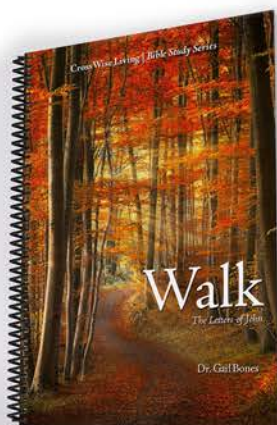
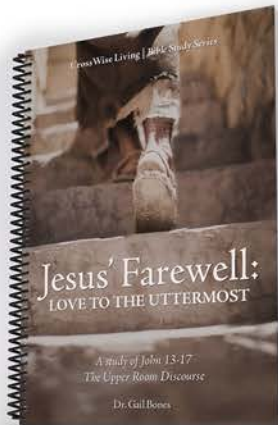
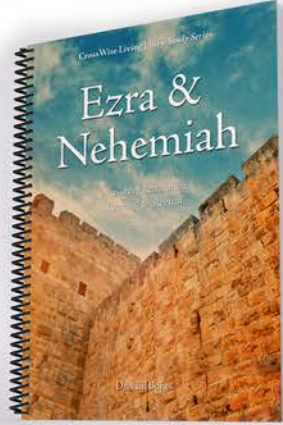
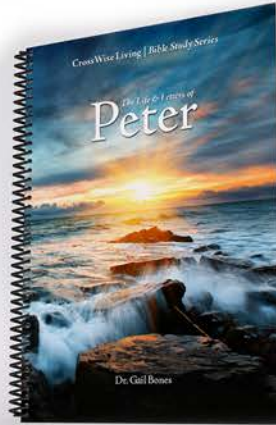
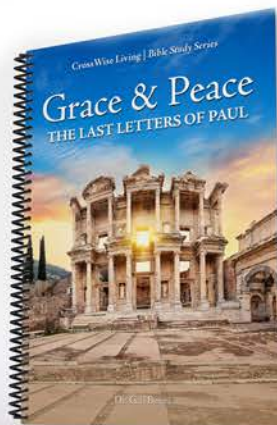
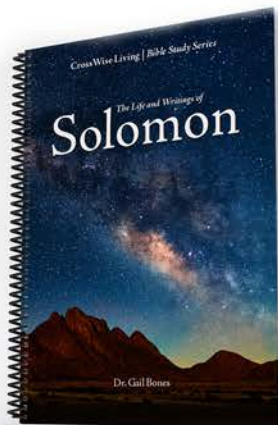
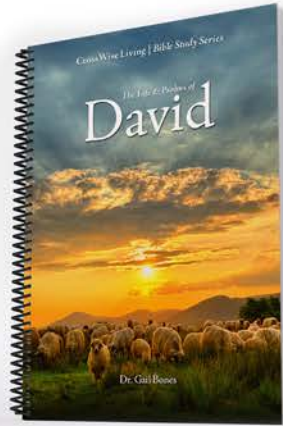
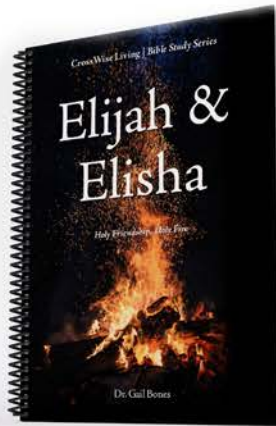
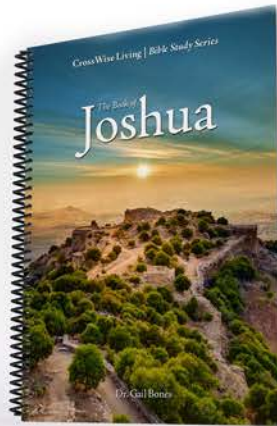
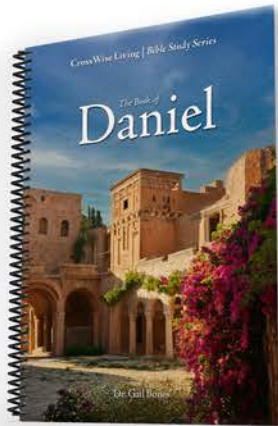
— MARK BUCHANAN, author of *Your Church is Too Safe* and *The Rest of God*



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