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DISCOVER TOGETHER



BIBLE STUDY

1 & 2 THESSALONIANS

*Discovering Hope in a
Promised Future*



Sue Edwards



Poetry by Misty Hedrick



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

1 and 2 Thessalonians: Discovering Hope in a Promised Future

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“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.”

—Jeremiah 29:11

Never has it been more important for God’s people to understand the prophetic word and to look for Christ’s appearing. People everywhere today have sobering, searching questions about what the future holds. God’s Word is the only place we can find sure answers. Yet at the very time when serious study . . . is most needed, its importance has diminished in many churches and in the lives of many Christians.

—Mark Hitchcock, The End

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Why and How to Study the Bible

Varied voices perpetually shout for our attention. Whose voice deserves our trust? The politician or evangelist on television? The Wall Street CEO? The Uber driver we've never met but count on to take us home? The man hawking cell phones behind the counter? The woman on the treadmill beside us? Maybe we can trust them; maybe we can't. Over time we can discern whether or not we're comfortable inviting them into our personal space or giving weight to their opinions. But the reality is that in time, everyone will disappoint us, and we will disappoint them too.

Only one is perfectly trustworthy. Only one offers authentic hope. "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming" (1 Peter 1:13).

Years ago, a wise woman, who secretly paid for my daughters to attend a Christian school we couldn't afford, planted that truth in my mind and heart. This concept blossomed into realistic expectations for life and a hearty hunger for a relationship with that one trustworthy person. That hunger led to a lifetime of savoring God's Love Letter, the Scriptures, and that relationship and practice upended everything. Wherever you are in your journey, Jesus invites you to experience abundant life with him. How?

Come with me to Thessalonica to discover hope in your promised future.



How to Get the Most Out of a Discover Together Bible Study

We're all at different junctures in our spiritual journeys, but God's Word doesn't separate us according to superficial differences. We all want to know God intimately and flourish, and we can all learn from one another. "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

Discover Together Bible studies are designed to promote unity, for all women to learn from and enjoy together regardless of age, stage, race, nationality, spiritual maturity, or economic or educational status. God proclaims we are all sisters in his forever family, preparing to spend eternity together (Matthew 12:46–50).

However, our schedules vary week to week depending on the needs of loved ones, travel responsibilities, and work demands. To honor these differences, this study provides two choices:

- Basic questions that require between one to one and a half hours of prep a week, offering in-depth Bible study with a minimum time commitment
- "Digging Deeper" questions for women who want to probe the text more deeply

Women wanting to tackle the "Digging Deeper" questions may

- need resources such as an atlas, Bible dictionary, or concordance;
- check online resources and compare parallel passages for additional insight;
- use an interlinear Greek-English text or *Vine's Expository Dictionary* to do word studies;
- grapple with complex theological issues and differing views; and
- create outlines and charts and write essays worthy of seminarians.

In addition to God's Love Letter, we also need authentic community and a place to be ourselves, where we are loved unconditionally despite our differences and challenged to grow.

This Bible study is designed for both individual and group discovery, but you will benefit more if you complete each week's lesson on your own and then meet with other women to share insights, struggles, and aha moments.

If you choose to meet together, someone needs to lead the group. You will find a free downloadable leader's guide for each study, along with tips for facilitating small groups with excellence, at www.discovertogether.com.

Choose a realistic level of Bible study that fits your schedule. You may want to finish the basic questions first and then dig deeper as time permits. Take time to savor the questions, and don't rush through the application.

Read the sidebars for additional insight to enrich the experience. Note the optional passages to memorize, and determine if this discipline would be helpful for you.

Do not allow yourself to be intimidated by women who have walked with the Lord longer, who have more time, or who are gifted differently. You bring something to the table no one else can contribute.

Make your study top priority. Consider spacing your study throughout the week to allow time to ponder and meditate on what the Holy Spirit is teaching you. Do not make other appointments during the group Bible study. Ask God to enable you to attend faithfully.

Come with an excitement to learn from others and a desire to share yourself and your journey. Give it your best to find the only one who will never let you down.

WHAT IS INDUCTIVE STUDY, AND WHY IS IT SO POWERFUL?

The Discover Together series uses inductive Bible study as a structure to dig into the Bible. Inductive study is the practice of investigating or interviewing a Bible passage to determine its true meaning, attempting to leave behind any presuppositions or personal agendas.

First, we seek to learn what the original author meant when writing to the original audience. We carefully examine the words and ideas. We ask questions like, What is happening? Who is it happening to? And where is it happening? Only after we answer those questions are we ready to discern what we think God meant.

And once we are clear about what God meant, then we are ready to apply these truths to our present circumstances, trusting that a steady diet of truth will result in an enriched relationship with Almighty God and beneficial changes in our character, actions, and attitudes.

Inductive study is powerful because discerning biblical truth is the best way we grow in faith, thrive in our lives, and deepen our relationship with the God who created us.

To experience this powerful process, we must immerse ourselves in

the practice of study as a lifestyle—and not just focus on a verse here and there. Our life goal must be to digest the Bible, whole book by whole book, as life-giving nourishment that cannot be attained any other way.

Over a span of sixteen hundred years, God orchestrated the creation of sixty-six biblical documents written by the Holy Spirit through more than forty human authors who came from different backgrounds. Together they produced a unified Love Letter that communicates without error God's affection, grace, direction, truth, and wisdom. He did this so that we would not be left without access to his mind and heart (Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 23).

THE INCREDIBLE BENEFITS OF BIBLICAL LITERACY

Earning a quality education changes us. It makes us literate and alters our future. Many of us sacrifice years, money, and energy to educate ourselves because we understand education's benefits and rewards.

Biblical literacy is even more valuable than secular education! But just like with secular learning, becoming biblically literate requires serious investment. However, the life-changing rewards and benefits far outweigh a diploma and increased lifetime earnings from the most prestigious Ivy League university.

A few benefits to Bible study include

- a more intimate relationship with Almighty God;
- an understanding of the way the world works and how to live well in it;
- a supernatural ability to love ourselves and others;
- insight into our own sin nature along with a path to overcome it, and when we fail, a way to wipe the shame slate clean, pick ourselves up forgiven, and move on with renewed hope;
- meaning and purpose;
- relational health experienced in community;
- support through struggles;
- continued growth in becoming a person who exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23); and
- contentment as we learn to trust in God's providential care.

Every book of the Bible provides another layer in the scaffolding of truth that transforms our minds, hearts, attitudes, and actions. What truths wait to be unearthed in these two letters to the Thessalonians, and how will they change us?



Why Study 1 and 2 Thessalonians?

We don't have to live life too long before we learn that we can't count on things we thought we could count on. In just a few days, everything can change. In just a few days, we can lose hope.

What do you count on?

Your job—it might not be here tomorrow.

Your health—some unexpected disease might claim you overnight.

Your family—you might not be able to see them.

Your friends—they might get sick too.

Your savings—it might be gone in a stock market crash.

Your amusements—they might be closed.

Your traditions—they might be canceled.

Your staples—they might not be available.

Your luxuries—they might be on back order.

Which of life's difficult experiences have you endured? What did you learn about yourself during those times?

Some people implode. Suicides soar. Abuse and domestic violence hide behind closed doors. Liquor store shelves are pillaged and curbsides pile high with beer, wine, and hard liquor cartons. And emotions run high: sadness, depression, disappointment, hopelessness.

When you're struggling, do any of these emotions sneak up and kidnap you? Probably most of us battle some anxiety, a normal response to crisis. Because of my early history of depression, I always wonder how I'll cope when life goes dark or when an unexpected trial pops up or when I'm ambushed by a struggle. I usually feel sad off and on, but thankfully I've learned to immerse myself in prayer, study, productive projects, and service. They keep me from falling into a pit of hopelessness. How about you?

We never know what challenges lie around the corner. Would you like to arm yourself for tomorrow? Would you like to trust that God will



I feel right at home in Thessalonica because I lived in Greece in my middle school and early high school years. My father was stationed on the Coast Guard cutter USS *Courier*, a Voice of America ship that broadcast behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. We lived on the Aegean island of Rhodes, where I spent afternoons snorkeling in the blue-green ocean, biking with friends around the island, exploring ancient ruins, and interacting with the Greek people, who came to love and protect us as the children of the Americans. I didn't know that I was walking in the steps of Paul, who visited Rhodes on one of his mission trips. Now that I'm a believer, I treasure those experiences—they bring alive the places Paul visited, and they enrich my study of Scripture. I hope my experiences in Greece will benefit you, too, as I lead you through our Thessalonian adventure. —Sue

Google Thessalonica (thessaloniki.travel) to see photographs of this modern-day city and tourist sites you might one day enjoy visiting.

One of Alexander the Great's army officers founded the city in the fourth century BC. He named it after his wife, Thessalonica, who was Alexander's half sister. Similar to the Old Testament books of Esther and Ruth, these two letters to the Thessalonians are named after a famous woman. Most scholars believe Paul and his companions arrived around AD 50. He often chose influential cities, like Thessalonica, to plant churches. The city of two hundred thousand was the capital of Macedonia and a flourishing commercial center with a bustling seaport. It was situated on a major stone highway connecting Rome to the East, the *Via Egnatia*, or Egnatian Way. Should a Christian church thrive there, chances were that smaller churches would spring up throughout the surrounding area.

provide a lifeline of hope however deep the pit? If you'd like to find hope in a promised future, come with me to Thessalonica.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed . . . so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

PREPARE FOR THE JOURNEY

Join me as we stroll arm in arm along the boulevard in Thessalonica, the second-largest city in Greece today. On our left, playful waves introduce gemlike turquoise waters to white-pebbled beaches. On our right, we stop for a leisurely Greek coffee or lemonada at an outdoor café or enjoy an English-language film at one of their cinemas. After all, Thessaloniki hosts its renowned film festival October through November.

What would make our trip more meaningful than an exciting holiday? The realization that we are walking in the footsteps of Paul.

We arrived by air or cruise ship, but Paul entered on foot almost two thousand years ago with two weary sidekicks, Silas and Timothy, after a grueling five-day walk from Philippi. Paul had just begun his second missionary trip, and he never intended to step foot into this part of Greece, called Macedonia. He probably planned to plant new churches or revisit churches he'd birthed during his first missionary trip throughout eastern regions of what is now Turkey. But just as God has his unique way of guiding each of us, God led Paul west by orchestrating a vision of a man pleading with Paul: "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Moved by this dream, Paul and his mentees packed up the next day and crossed the border into Europe. God's plan was bigger than Paul's.

During their initial days in Thessalonica, Paul likely wandered through the city looking for clues to better understand the people he hoped to reach with the gospel. Polytheism was common for most Greeks, and their idols adorned every corner. Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece, was believed to be the place Zeus regularly gathered his pantheon of gods. On a clear day, Paul could face southeast and view the summit of Olympus.

If Paul and his companions eavesdropped on conversations, they might have heard townsfolk speculating about ways to placate the anger and win the favor of their fickle gods. Soon Paul would show them the beautiful character of the one true God and that cyclonic gospel message would sweep through the city. Some would believe, their lives upended for eternity. Others would be so threatened, they would form murderous coalitions to silence these intruders.

As full of intrigue and drama as any Netflix series, these two letters reveal how God used early Christians to plant the seeds that four hundred years later would uproot the ferocious Roman Empire and ultimately spread the gospel throughout the world.



DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE END TIMES

With the exception of the book of Revelation, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians reveal more details about your future than any other book in the Bible. Understanding these beautiful future realities gives us hope to persevere in difficult times and something to look forward to.

But respected scholars and pastors hold different views about how to interpret the Bible regarding the end times. Should we interpret these particular passages literally or figuratively? When will these events occur—in the future, or have they already occurred? How do all the pieces fit together?

Below are some of the varied interpretations.

Four views on when or if end times events will occur:

1. These events will really happen in the future.
 - This approach consistently interprets the Bible literally, attempting to understand first what the original author was communicating to the original audience and then what that text means for us today.
 - If the original author seemed to be using figurative language, then interpreters take that into account, but otherwise interpreters believe the passage means what it says.
 - Known as the futurist view.
2. These events won't ever really happen; they only teach spiritual principles.
 - The Thessalonian letters teach timeless spiritual lessons and principles that help Christians understand great historical themes and the ultimate triumph of good over evil.
 - These principles help believers live well today in a world full of challenges and struggles.
 - Known as the idealist or spiritualist view.
3. These events already happened.
 - These prophecies were fulfilled by ancient catastrophic events, like the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.
 - Known as the preterist view.

4. These events are happening now.

- These prophecies are being fulfilled by the atrocities, barbarism, chaos, and turmoil we are experiencing now during the church age.
- Known as the historicist view.

Three views on the idea of a real millennial kingdom:

Revelation 20:1–6 talks about Christ ruling a thousand-year kingdom on the earth. Is this a real kingdom that will actually last one thousand years? Will this occur in the future, is it already here, or is it in process?

1. A literal thousand-year kingdom will occur in the future.

- After Christians are raptured, they will spend seven years with God in heaven while those on earth will endure a seven-year period of great suffering and destruction known as the great tribulation described in the book of Revelation. Then Christians will return to earth with Christ from the heavenly realms to establish and reign over a thousand-year kingdom on the earth, a time of unprecedented peace and justice.
- Known as the premillennial view.

2. The kingdom is in process now.

- The present earth is becoming better and better as Christians spread the gospel around the world. In time we will usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity. Then Christ will return to take believers into eternal bliss.
- Known as the postmillennial view.

3. The kingdom reigns in our hearts now.

- The kingdom that Paul and other biblical authors mentioned is spiritual in nature. It already exists since Christ came to earth to reign in Christians' hearts.
- When we die, we go to a place of eternal bliss, called heaven.
- Known as the amillennial view.

Three views on when the rapture will occur:

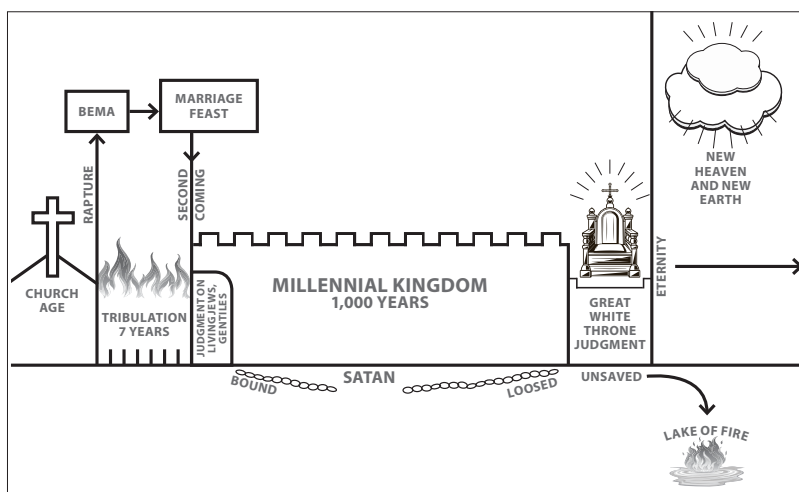
Paul taught the Thessalonians about an event theologians call “the rapture,” which means “snatching away” (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11). If we interpret what Paul and others write literally, we can conclude:

- This event will occur suddenly when Christ calls all believers to leave the earth when he takes them away to a place we call heaven.
- There we wait with him for the time when he will bring us back to earth to set up his millennial kingdom.
- During the wait, believers in their glorified, resurrected bodies will experience perfect communion with God and other

believers, as well as spectacular events described in the book of Revelation.

Theologians who believe in a literal thousand-year millennial kingdom debate whether the rapture will occur before, during, or after the seven-year tribulation. The three main views are these:

1. The rapture will occur before the tribulation (pretribulation view).
2. The rapture will occur in the middle of the tribulation (mid-tribulation view).
3. The rapture will occur at the end of the tribulation (posttribulation view).



THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Some Christian doctrines are central to the faith—for example, the virgin birth, Christ's atonement, and the return of Christ, but others are disputable. That means that respected, godly scholars who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible disagree on some of the details. Christians tend not to break fellowship with other believers on these disputable matters.

That said, prophecies about what will happen in the future are all through the Bible, and I find them indescribably comforting and life-giving as I navigate the complex maze of living in a fallen world. When I'm discouraged and need hope, looking ahead to the glorious future my Jesus has planned for me enables me to look up and push forward.

I hold a premillennial, pretribulation view. That means I believe the end times events will occur in the future. That includes a literal one-thousand-year kingdom on the earth led by King Jesus, a place of yearned-for justice and peace. He establishes this kingdom after the tribulation, a time of horrendous chaos and judgment. However, out of his divine love and mercy, Jesus takes the church from the earth first, and believers will return with him to set up the kingdom.

HOW TO DISAGREE AGREEABLY

If you work through this study with others, they may express different opinions. Allow them the freedom to articulate their ideas. Listen with respect to everyone. Create a safe place where honest dialogue thrives. Trust the Holy Spirit to teach each of you as you gather to learn and encourage one another. Don't be afraid to gently disagree, but focus on the ideas and don't allow these differences to elevate into personal disputes. Love one another and refuse to sacrifice your unity over disputable matters. At the same time, speak up kindly concerning what you believe and why. As we say in our seminary, "Teach truth; love well."