

OneBook.

DAILY - WEEKLY

The Letters to the Thessalonians

Matt O'Reilly



AN EIGHT-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

OneBook.

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Matt O'Reilly

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CONTENTS

Welcome to OneBook Daily-Weekly vii

Week One

Unexpected News, New Community **1** **(1 Thessalonians 1:1–10)**

Day One: Faith, Love, Hope	1
Day Two: Gospel Power	3
Day Three: Life Worth Imitating	4
Day Four: Gotta Serve Someone	6
Day Five: Why Wrath?	8
Week One: Gathering Discussion Outline	10

Week Two

Shared Suffering, Shared Life **12** **(1 Thessalonians 2:1–20)**

Day One: People-Pleaser or God-Pleaser?	12
Day Two: When Life Gets Hard	14
Day Three: But How?	16
Day Four: Where Is God?	17
Day Five: Fruit Matters	19
Week Two: Gathering Discussion Outline	21

Week Three

Keeping Faith, Standing Firm **23** **(1 Thessalonians 3:1–13)**

Day One: Destined for Trouble	23
Day Two: Faith under Attack	24

Contents

Day Three: Grace in Community	26
Day Four: Complete Transformation	28
Day Five: Grace for Holy Love	29
Week Three: Gathering Discussion Outline	32

Week Four

Holy Bodies, New Bodies **34** **(1 Thessalonians 4:1–18)**

Day One: Start with Holy	34
Day Two: Holiness Happens in Community	35
Day Three: Holiness Means Abounding Love	37
Day Four: Christian Hope Is Resurrection Hope	39
Day Five: Grief Wrapped in Hope	41
Week Four: Gathering Discussion Outline	43

Week Five

Standing Firm, Becoming Holy **45** **(1 Thessalonians 5:1–28)**

Day One: Don't Predict; Prepare	45
Day Two: Remember Who You Are	47
Day Three: From Distraction to Discipline	48
Day Four: Community Priority	50
Day Five: End with Holy	52
Week Five: Gathering Discussion Outline	54

Week Six

Your Journey toward Glory **56** **(2 Thessalonians 1:1–12)**

Day One: Soon, but Not Now	56
Day Two: Room to Grow	58
Day Three: Is God Just?	59

Contents

Day Four: Choices Matter	61
Day Five: What's the Purpose?	62
Week Six: Gathering Discussion Outline	65

Week Seven

What Happens Next? 67

(2 Thessalonians 2:1–17)

Day One: The Day and Your Identity	67
Day Two: The Lawless One	68
Day Three: Jesus Wins	70
Day Four: Deception and Delusion	72
Day Five: Made for Glory	73
Week Seven: Gathering Discussion Outline	76

Week Eight

Wrapping Up 78

(2 Thessalonians 3:1–18)

Day One: Driven by Passion	78
Day Two: Faithful Lord, Faithful People	80
Day Three: Faithful Work	81
Day Four: Tough Love	83
Day Five: Persevere in Peace	85
Week Eight: Gathering Discussion Outline	87

WELCOME TO ONEBOOK DAILY-WEEKLY

John Wesley, in a letter to one of his leaders, penned the following:

O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant. Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days. . . . Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether.

Rarely are our lives most shaped by our biggest ambitions and highest aspirations. Rather, our lives are most shaped, for better or for worse, by those small things we do every single day.

At Seedbed, our biggest ambition and highest aspiration is to resource the followers of Jesus to become lovers and doers of the Word of God every single day, to become people of One Book.

To that end, we have created the OneBook Daily-Weekly. First, it's important to understand what this is not: warm, fuzzy, sentimental devotions. If you engage the Daily-Weekly for any length of time, you will learn the Word of God. You will grow profoundly in your love for God, and you will become a passionate lover of people.

How Does the Daily-Weekly Work?

Daily. As the name implies, every day invites a short but substantive engagement with the Bible. Five days a week you will read a passage of Scripture followed by a short segment of teaching and closing with questions for reflection and self-examination. On the sixth day, you will review and reflect on the previous five days.

Weekly. Each week, on the seventh day, find a way to gather with at least one other person doing the study. Pursue the weekly guidance for gathering. Share learning, insight, encouragement, and most important, how the Holy Spirit is working in your lives.

Welcome to OneBook Daily-Weekly

That's it. Depending on the length of the study, when the eight or twelve weeks are done, we will be ready with the next study. On an ongoing basis, we will release new editions of the Daily-Weekly. Over time, those who pursue this course of learning will develop a rich library of Bible learning resources for the long haul.

OneBook Daily-Weekly will develop eight- and twelve-week studies that cover the entire Old and New Testaments. Seedbed will publish new studies regularly so that an ongoing supply of group lessons will be available. All titles will remain accessible, which means they can be used in any order that fits your needs or the needs of your group.

If you are looking for a substantive study to learn Scripture through a steadfast method, look no further.

WEEK ONE

1 Thessalonians 1:1–10

Unexpected News, New Community

ONE

Faith, Love, Hope

1 Thessalonians 1:1–3 *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.*

²*We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly* ³*remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Key Observation. All followers of Jesus are called to be in active ministry, not just pastors and church staff.

Understanding the Word. Few people write letters anymore. For a long time, letters were the only way to communicate long distance. People didn't have phones. Or e-mail. Or texting. In the ancient Greek-speaking world, letters followed a pattern. The author put his or her name at the top followed by the recipient. Then came a word of greeting. This letter is addressed to the whole congregation, not one individual. It's meant for the whole group. That means it isn't just a letter, it's also a speech. And when it arrived, someone would've read it to the whole congregation. These opening verses hint at what Paul finds most important: faith, love, and hope. Those three virtues will keep coming up.

This first mention of faith, love, and hope comes in a prayer. We might be tempted to hurry on to the meat of the letter, but I've learned that when Paul prays, it's worth slowing down and lingering. Let's hear what he says. First,

Paul's prayer reminds the Thessalonians of their importance to him. He intercedes for them. He thanks God for them. He does it *always* and *constantly*. You feel his affection for them. They'll want to hear what he says, because they know how much he cares.

Second, what does work have to do with faith, labor with love, and steadfastness with hope? For Paul, virtue produces action—faith produces work; love produces labor; hope produces perseverance. What's the difference between *work* and *labor*? Both words describe the mission of the church. In 1 Thessalonians 2:9, Paul mentions his own labor and work in gospel ministry. The same pair of words designate his work and the Thessalonians' work. Here's why that matters. Paul is depicting the Thessalonians as participants in the mission. They labor with him; they work with him. That work flows out of their faith and love. There is no hint that Paul is a professional hired to do ministry for the congregation. Forget that. Paul wants his first hearers to know—and he wants us to know—that the whole community of believers, both leaders and congregation, participate together in God's mission to bring the good news of King Jesus to the world.

The continued success of that mission requires steadfast endurance, and endurance flows out of hope in Jesus. We'll find out later in the letter that life hasn't been easy for the Thessalonians. They've suffered for following Jesus. But they've stayed on course despite adversity. Paul will say more about that later. The main thing to discover here is that God gives the strength to stay faithful to the mission, especially when it's hard.

1. Think of a time when you suffered or had a setback. What was the cause? Did you have a community of believers to help you through that time? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?
2. How have you labored in mission with your community of faith? What is God calling you to do next?
3. What are you doing to strengthen your partnership with other believers to advance the kingdom of God?

TWO

Gospel Power

1 Thessalonians 1:4–5 *For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of persons we proved to be among you for your sake.*

Key Observation. When we tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit uses our words to convict people of sin and bring them into a relationship of life-giving love with God.

Understanding the Word. Why was Paul so deeply committed to the gospel? We're about to find out. Now *gospel* is a word that means good news. In ancient Rome, it was used to celebrate the reign of a new emperor or a major military victory. But when Paul spoke of the gospel, he was referring to the story of Jesus. It's the good news that Jesus of Nazareth died to rescue people from the consequences and power of sin. It's the good news that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead. And it's the good news that Jesus has been exalted to the throne of heaven where he reigns over the cosmos, everything that has been made, whether we can see it or not.

Paul knows this gospel has unique power. This good news is unlike other news. These words are unlike any other words. Why? The answer comes in three parts: power, Holy Spirit, conviction. When Paul told the story of Jesus, people weren't simply persuaded by good arguments; God's Holy Spirit transformed them. It may help to remember how strange the Jesus story must have sounded in first-century Thessalonica. Paul spoke of a Jewish man named Jesus who was crucified as a failed revolutionary, then raised bodily from the dead, and exalted to the throne of heaven. He had to know how unlikely it would be for people to believe that. Nevertheless, Paul was gripped by the gospel. He had to tell the story. And as he told the story, he found others were gripped too. They believed what Paul said about Jesus. They trusted. They obeyed. There was new power at work in them—the power of God's Holy Spirit.

And what does the Spirit do? The Spirit brings full conviction. Take a minute to think of a time you did something wrong. Did you feel bad about

it? That feeling is used by the Holy Spirit to persuade us of our sin. That's the negative aspect of conviction, and it's an essential step toward making things right. More positively, however, conviction can also describe strong beliefs. When we embrace the truth of the gospel and become fully committed to it, we call it a conviction. We may even call it *deep* conviction. Paul probably has both meanings in mind. When the good news about Jesus is told, God's Spirit opens our eyes to things that keep us from knowing God (we can call those things sin) and persuades us of the truth about Jesus. That's what Paul means by "full conviction." That's what the Holy Spirit does when God's people tell the Jesus story.

1. Can you think of time when you experienced God's grace before you became a follower of Jesus? Why is it important to know that salvation is always initiated by God through the Holy Spirit?
2. Have you ever had the experience to share the good news about Jesus with another person? How did you feel? What did you do?
3. What can you do to create more opportunities to talk about Jesus with new people? How can your community help you?

THREE

Life Worth Imitating

1 Thessalonians 1:6–8 *And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it.*

Key Observation. God's kingdom spreads when believers live in a manner worthy of imitation.

Understanding the Word. Have you noticed how passion is contagious? If you've ever had a teacher who loves her subject and her students, you know

what I mean. You can't help but share the excitement; the passion rubs off. That's what it was like when Paul got to Thessalonica. He was nothing if not passionate. Remember Paul sacrificed an upwardly mobile and influential life to become a traveling church planter. He was dedicated to the mission. His love for Jesus rubbed off on the Thessalonians. They became imitators of Paul.

Now this is the first time in the letter Paul mentions how the Thessalonians endured persecution. He doesn't go into detail, but he does connect their perseverance to imitation. Like Paul, they remained faithful despite the cost. Ultimately, imitation is about Jesus, who suffered and died to redeem us. Jesus wasn't focused on his own needs or comfort. He didn't prioritize the preservation of his life; he prioritized the salvation of the world. He "emptied himself of all but love," as one songwriter put it.¹ All Christian imitation boils down to imitating the self-giving love of Jesus. That's a life worth imitating. Paul imitated Jesus. The Thessalonians imitated Paul.

Now if we're going to talk about imitation, there are two concepts to cover: transformation and multiplication. Let's take transformation first. When Paul says the Thessalonians "became imitators" of him, he implies that their lives changed. The Thessalonians had to be willing to look at themselves and determine what didn't line up with God's best. Whether it's idolatry, anger, laziness, or something else, following Jesus means some things stop and other things start. How do we know what to stop doing and what to start doing? God gives us people to imitate. The Thessalonians looked at Paul as an example of commitment to Jesus. He taught them how to be single-minded, devoted, and holy. He lived a life worth imitating, and his life was an instrument of grace to the Thessalonians. In Paul, they saw a real difference.

What's striking is that the process didn't stop when the Thessalonians became imitators of Paul. As they changed, they also became an example for others to imitate. Their reputation spread to the north (Macedonia) and the south (Achaia). That's what I mean by multiplication. If one believer lives a life worth imitating, and a few people begin to imitate him or her and others begin to imitate them, then the number of people who embody the character of Jesus grows. Imitation is how the world changes.

1. Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be, That I Should Gain?" 1738. Public domain.

I hope you are beginning to see that Christian community is essential. If we think of Christianity as a solo project—a private relationship between me and Jesus that doesn’t depend on others—then there is no place for imitation. If we are going to imitate someone, then we need to be in community with that person. And if others are going to imitate us, the same is true. Imitation requires community.

1. Think of a time when you experienced a challenge or setback. How did you respond? Would you respond differently now that you know imitation of Jesus involves perseverance through suffering?
2. Do you have mature followers of Jesus to imitate? Who are they? Do you live in a way that is worthy of imitation? Could you tell a new follower of Jesus, “Imitate me as I imitate Christ”?
3. What changes do you need to make to begin to live a life worthy of imitation?

FOUR

Gotta Serve Someone

1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 *For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.*

Key Observation. An idol is anything that gets more of our energy and devotion than Jesus. Following Jesus means turning from idols.

Understanding the Word. People are starting to talk. The Thessalonians are getting a reputation. And Paul couldn’t be happier. They’ve turned from idols to worship the true God. Now the Roman Empire had no shortage of gods and no shortage of shrines to honor those gods. There were the typical gods from Greek and Roman mythology. You may have heard of Zeus or Poseidon or Athena or Aphrodite. And there were others. Some of the

emperors were even worshipped as deities. And the Romans didn't separate devotion from business, family, or fun. To the contrary, worship was interwoven with every facet of life. Pagan piety permeated Roman society. This may explain why the Thessalonians faced persecution. When they stopped revering the Roman gods, it would have been perceived as a threat to society. In contrast, Jewish people like Paul believed there was nothing to pagan idols. Those gods were false gods; idols were just carved wood and metal. The true God is the living Creator. He requires his people to worship him alone (see Exodus 20:1-4).

Now most of us probably don't have statues in our homes that we bow to every day. But what if idolatry (the worship of false gods) has less to do with carved statues and more to do with our values and priorities? Who gets our best? How do we spend our energy? Our time? Our money? How do we use our resources? What do we care about most? If we want to know what we worship, those are the questions to ask.

Framed this way, all sorts of things (other than God) become candidates for our worship. Am I a workaholic? Do I neglect my faith and my family to climb the corporate ladder? And what about entertainment? Do I spend excessive money on stuff that I think will make me happy? Houses? Cars? Televisions? Game systems? Ever consider how easy it is to be more devoted to a college football team than to the kingdom of God? And what happens when we let our kids prioritize athletics or other activities over the worship of God and the mission of the church? What are we teaching our children when other things (like a Little League game) keep us from gathering with other believers to worship Jesus, who loved us and gave himself for us? Our kids know who our gods are.

Paul wants his readers to understand that the worship of the one true God revealed in Jesus is mutually exclusive with the worship of other things. We can't do both. We'll either worship God or we'll worship something else. That's why Paul talks about turning from idols to God. The Thessalonians had to turn their backs on the false gods of Rome to become followers of Jesus. And we have to do the same with our idols. Now I'm not saying you can't ever go to a ball game again. And I'm not saying you shouldn't have a car or go to the movies. I'm inviting you to think about who or what gets your best. Is it Jesus? Or something else?

1. Take a minute to consider your priorities. Who or what gets most of your energy and attention?
2. What idols do you need to turn from? How can group members help each other make that turn?

FIVE

Why Wrath?

1 Thessalonians 1:9–10 *For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.*

Key Observation. God's wrath is his measured, intentional, holy, and just opposition to forces that destroy his good creation.

Understanding the Word. There's something we need to admit up front. A lot of people struggle with the Bible's talk of God's wrath. We find the idea of an angry deity uncomfortable and off-putting. Who wants to worship a God like that? We'd much rather hear about God's love than God's wrath. So, what do we do with passages like this?

What if I told you God's wrath is necessary because of God's love? Think about it this way. Love is at the heart of God's character. God loves the world. He made it; it's his. And God loves human beings. He made us to embody the beauty of the glory of his image and he has graciously called us to represent him to the world. But there's an enemy out there. And that enemy is committed to destroying God's beautiful creation. The enemy is sin. It's a cancer that corrupts human life. It moves people to vanity, to strive for selfish gain, to manipulate the world, and to use God's good creation for their own evil ends. Now if God is committed to his creation, and if there's an enemy bent on destroying that creation, what posture do you think God will take toward that enemy? The answer should be clear: he'll go after it with everything he's got; he'll show that enemy no mercy. And he'll do it because he loves his world. He'll do it because he loves us.

That's what Paul means by the wrath of God. We're uncomfortable with that language because we've all seen or experienced unholy human wrath: an abusive husband or father, a vicious colleague, oppressive dictators, merciless terrorists. When we hear of *divine* wrath, we take those wicked examples and maximize them by infinite proportion. But that isn't what Paul means. God's wrath is not the fury of an angry father or the mad aspirations of a power-hungry tyrant. God's wrath is his opposition to anything that harms his good creation. It's measured and intentional. It's right and just—holy and good. And it's the result of his love. God loves us. That's why he turns his wrath on sin, because sin attempts to destroy everything God loves.

The problem is that people dig in their heels and refuse to break their alliance with sin. They are committed to the corrupting cancerous power of sin. They don't want to be free from it. They give themselves to it. And they love it. Paul preached that Jesus died and was raised to set us free from sin. Jesus gave everything to disentangle us from that which seeks to destroy us. God will put everything right. That's what we're waiting for.

But waiting doesn't mean passivity. Paul doesn't expect believers to hang out and do nothing until God wraps up the project. Waiting for Jesus means actively working to advance his kingdom, engaging in mission, proclaiming the good news, and opposing evil in every form. That's what Paul calls the Thessalonians to do. That's what Jesus calls us all to do.

1. Think of a time you saw or experienced human wrath. How is God's just opposition against sin different from that?
2. What is your community doing to resist the evil in the world as you eagerly await Jesus' return?

WEEK ONE

GATHERING DISCUSSION OUTLINE

- A. **Open session in prayer.** Ask that God would astonish us anew with fresh insight from God's Word and transform us into the disciples that Jesus desires us to become.
- B. **View video for this week's readings.**
- C. **What were key insights or takeaways that you gained from your reading during the week and from watching the video commentary?** In particular, how did these help you to grow in your faith and understanding of Scripture this week? What parts of the Bible lessons or study raised questions for you?
- D. **Discuss questions selected from the daily readings.** Invite class members to share key insights or to raise questions that they found to be the most meaningful.
 - 1. **KEY OBSERVATION:** All followers of Jesus are called to be in active ministry, not just pastors and church staff.
DISCUSSION QUESTION: What are you doing to strengthen your partnership with other believers to advance the kingdom of God?
 - 2. **KEY OBSERVATION:** When we tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit uses our words to convict people of sin and bring them into a relationship of life-giving love with God.
DISCUSSION QUESTION: What can you do to create more opportunities to talk about Jesus with new people? How can your community help you?

3. **KEY OBSERVATION:** God's kingdom spreads when believers live in a manner worthy of imitation.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What changes do you need to make to begin to live a life worthy of imitation?

4. **KEY OBSERVATION:** An idol is anything that gets more of our energy and devotion than Jesus. Following Jesus means turning from idols.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What idols do you need to turn from? How can group members help each other make that turn?

5. **KEY OBSERVATION:** God's wrath is his measured, intentional, holy, and just opposition to forces that destroy his good creation.

DISCUSSION QUESTION: What is your community doing to resist the evil in the world as you eagerly await Jesus' return?

- E. **As the study concludes, consider specific ways that this week's Bible lessons invite you to grow and call you to change.** How do this week's scriptures call us to think differently? How do they challenge us to change in order to align ourselves with God's work in the world? What specific actions should we take to apply the insights of the lessons into our daily lives? What kind of person do our Bible lessons call us to become?

- F. **Close session with prayer.** Emphasize God's ongoing work of transformation in our lives in preparation for loving mission and service in the world. Pray for absent class members as well as for persons whom we need to invite to join our study.

WEEK TWO

1 Thessalonians 2:1–20

Shared Suffering, Shared Life

ONE

People-Pleaser or God-Pleaser?

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8 NIV *You know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. ²We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition. ³For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. ⁴On the contrary, we speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts. ⁵You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness. ⁶We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. ⁷Instead, we were like young children among you.*

Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, ⁸so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

Key Observation. All of life should be lived to please God alone.

Understanding the Word. Most of us live under constant pressure to please people. Employers, coworkers, our spouse, friends, church members—we want others to be happy with us. That desire is reinforced by constant immersion in social media, which always leaves us craving one more “like.” Paul

offers a vision of Christian life that is radically countercultural. He doesn't live to please people. Paul lives to please God. That's the focus of 1 Thessalonians 2, and it has big implications for Paul and us.

First, living to please God meant Paul would suffer. His message about Jesus faced opposition. He mentions they had "suffered and been treated outrageously" in Philippi. We learn in Acts 16 that Paul was accused of disturbing the city and encouraging illegal activity. So, the city authorities had him stripped, beaten, and jailed. But Paul didn't live to please them; he lived to please God. And God called Paul to preach Jesus. Paul lived courageously into his calling, despite the suffering.

We don't always think of following Jesus as something that takes courage. In North America, we aren't in danger of being arrested for going to church. We can follow Jesus without fear of physical harm. But there are places in the world where following Jesus does take courage—great courage. In some parts of China, people who become Christians risk being disowned by family or reported to the local government. Evangelism was recently criminalized in Bolivia. If you attempt to lead someone to Jesus in that country, you could be imprisoned for five to twelve years. It takes real courage to follow Jesus in places like that.

Second, living to please God motivates integrity. All of us can think of preachers who are known as tricksters. They promise health and wealth to those who give money to their ministries, and they end up looking like they're in it for the money. Paul doesn't want to give that impression. He's not preaching for the payoff. He's not doing it for public acclaim. He's not out to be a celebrity. He simply wants to be faithful. You see, Paul understood that our lives will either commend the gospel or undermine it. If we're going to tell people Jesus loves them, we need to also embody that love. If we appear to seek our own gain, we hinder the gospel and create barriers to faith for others. Living to please God means living with integrity that commends the good news.

1. Imagine God is calling you to be a missionary in a country where Christians are persecuted. What emotions would you experience? Would your family and friends encourage you or discourage you from living to please God? How would you respond?



Paul's letters to the Thessalonians are some of our earliest existing writings in the New Testament. As such, they offer a unique glimpse into some of the most pressing issues as the gospel began to spread across the ancient world. How should believers respond when their faith is a minority perspective and are suffering persecution? What does genuine holiness look like? Is life after death truly worth believing in, and what does it look like? Will Jesus actually make good on his promise to come back?

These enduring questions and more run throughout these two brief letters, and in this eight-week study, you'll be introduced to Paul's inspired response. Discover how the gospel of Jesus will give you the strength you need as you eagerly await his promised return to make our world right again.

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OneBook. | DAILY-WEEKLY

Designed to be engaged by small groups, Sunday school classes, one-on-one discipleship approaches, and individual learners, the OneBook Daily-Weekly is a Bible learning resource for the long haul. Each volume of the Daily-Weekly provides a passage of Scripture each week, broken into five daily readings, with a sixth day for reflection and one day for weekly gathering. This arrangement assists learners in the day-in and day-out obedience of becoming people and communities of One Book.

Groups are encouraged to use for each volume of the Daily-Weekly the accompanying DVD, which includes a weekly seven- to ten-minute video teaching session from the author.

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