

# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Life's Greatest Comfort

Romans 11:33–36

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY



### LET'S BEGIN HERE

Searching the Scriptures without some reliable, biblical convictions is like setting out into open seas in a sailboat without a rudder. There's no way to guarantee you're on a correct heading. That's why sound theological convictions are essential for every Bible student to maintain in order to help steer them through difficult and confusing passages of Scripture. One of those theological convictions is the truth that God is sovereign—perfectly in control of every aspect of all of our lives and the universe in which we live. Not only is a firm grasp of God's sovereignty a reliable compass for navigating unknown straits of Scripture, it also proves a comforting doctrine in difficult times. Let's see why this is true in today's study from the holiday series *The Greatest Words*.



### Getting Started: The King Learns a Lesson on God's Sovereignty

When searching the Scriptures, a helpful first step is to gather resources that will guide you in your study. For the individual messages in this series, we recommend you have a good Bible dictionary and theological commentary for both the Old Testament and New Testament as well as a theological dictionary and a Bible atlas. For each passage discussed, you will want to read and study what has been written about context, significant words, and the overall meaning of the passage.

Though in this message we will ultimately be looking closely at Romans 11:33–36, we turn first to a story in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Take some time to read through Daniel 4. Reading the entire chapter will help you become familiar with the setting.

Daniel is one of the Prophetic Books in the Old Testament. This grand book of prophecy tells the story of Daniel who had been taken captive from Judah and brought into exile in Babylon in approximately 605 BC. Because of Daniel's remarkable faithfulness to the Lord God and on account of Daniel's vibrant witness in words and deeds, the national leadership of the time was greatly impacted.

## Quotable

*In 1961, I came to terms with the fact that God isn't almost sovereign. He isn't partially in control. He is ever-present, ever-aware, and fully at work in my life and in the life of every other individual. I came to terms with the fact that God is in charge.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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Locate a Bible atlas and find a map that depicts the region of Babylon during Old Testament times. You might find it on a map titled *World of the Patriarchs* or something similar. Once you locate the map, trace your finger from the eastern shore of Mediterranean Sea straight east, across the Arabian Desert. You will find an area labeled Babylonia. Now locate a map that might be labeled *Assyrian and Babylonian Empires*. Take a few minutes to compare the two maps. Pay close attention to the boundaries. In the year 600 BC, for instance, how far does the Babylonian Empire stretch to the west? How much of what is known today as Israel would have been under Babylonian rule? What other observations can you make from these maps?

What kind of climate do you think would have been experienced during Daniel's years in Babylon? Why?

Now look up *Babylon* or *Babylonian Empire* in your Bible dictionary. What interesting facts do you discover about what life would have been like in that area during Daniel's story?

This would be a good time to consult a theological dictionary—a scholarly volume that defines theological terms and concepts that weigh in on Scripture. Also included are biblical references that serve as examples of those themes.

Look up *God's Sovereignty* in a theological dictionary (we recommend *The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell), and read through the information. You might even take time to look up and read the various Bible references that are included with that entry. Make some notes below on what you discover.



Now that you've done some preliminary spade work, it's time to dig a bit deeper into the passages discussed in today's lesson.



### Your Turn in the Scriptures

Find Daniel 4:34–37, and read through those few verses carefully and thoughtfully. Based on these verses, what do you know about King Nebuchadnezzar? What experience had he just been delivered from (4:28–33)?

After reading this section of Daniel 4, circle the phrase below that best describes what the king is offering:

- A historical record of the events
- A summary of his dreams
- An edict for all the people to obey
- His personal testimony of faith

Explain why you circled the option you did. Make sure you use evidence from the passage to support your response.

As a ruler of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar once considered himself sovereign over all the earth. How do you think his view of sovereignty changed?



How might you use this intriguing Old Testament story to explain the doctrine of God's sovereignty to an unbeliever? How about to a small group of elementary-age children?

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All of the major theological doctrines expressed in the Old Testament find support in the pages of the New Testament. Romans 11 offers a stirring expression of the doctrine of God's sovereignty that Babylon's ancient king gave witness to nearly a thousand years before Christ.

Turn to Romans 11:33–36. Take a few minutes to read these few verses aloud, reading as if for the very first time. What is your first impression of Paul's words?

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What kind of expression would you say this is? A prayer? An expression of praise? A declaration? Explain your answer based on the text.

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Write down a few ways in which Paul's words are echoes of what Nebuchadnezzar uttered in Daniel 4. (Remember: *Correlation* is an important part of the searching the Scriptures process, showing how one passage of Scripture compares to and supports another.)

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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Life's Greatest Comfort

*Romans 11:33–36*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

In the space below, list any attributes of God that you find embedded in Paul's words. Hint: *Sovereignty* is one of them.

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Now turn to 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. In this section of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, the doctrine of God's sovereignty is also on display. How do Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15 compare to his expression in Romans 11? How are they different?

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Using the words below that are not in any order, based on 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, arrange the words in order from top to bottom, with the top name being the most sovereign and in authority.

Humankind

Every ruler and authority

All things everywhere

Jesus Christ

God the Father

### *Finding Yourself in the Story*

Placing yourself in the story of Scripture helps you to apply to your own life what you have learned as well as to illustrate to those with whom you are communicating just how important the lessons are to embrace. In what ways are you able to relate to Nebuchadnezzar's story in Daniel 4? Be as specific and transparent as you possibly can in your response.

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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Life's Greatest Comfort

*Romans 11:33–36*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

Now read again Paul's *doxology* (word of praise) in Romans 11:33–36. Thinking about what you have experienced in your own relationship with the Lord and using Paul's words as a model, write out your own personal doxology to the Lord, giving witness to your commitment to His sovereign rule in your life.

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### A FINAL PRAYER

*Lord, thank You for Your living Word, which has made known to me Your sovereign goodness and power. May I represent You in all my ways, through Christ my Lord, amen.*



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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Life's Greatest Comfort

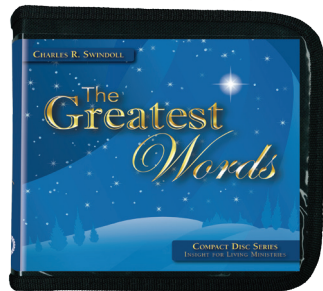
Romans 11:33–36

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY



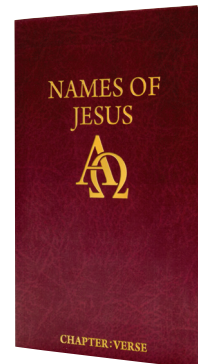
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### LET'S BEGIN HERE

The great doctrines of the Bible not only provide a solid foundation for our faith but offer to us genuine comfort during difficult times. That is especially true of the many attributes of God—those divine characteristics that mark His nature and His ways. Psalm 139 uniquely explores many of those expressions of divine nature, leaving much to mystery, but also signaling to us the personal and powerful care that God offers His children, providing our greatest reassurance in times of doubt.



### Getting Started: The Making of a Psalm

God's people, the Hebrews, enjoyed a rich history of song-making and worship, both personal and corporate. The Old Testament presents in all its genres a treasure trove of songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, composed and sung by the faithful, from Genesis to the end of Malachi. A significant concentration of those worship hymns found a permanent home in the Hebrew psalter—the book of Psalms. Not unlike the hymns and praise songs of today, the Psalms gave expression to the struggles of the faithful as well as to the deep truths of God as revealed in creation (Job 38:7), through the ministry of His servants (Deuteronomy 32:1–43), and often accompanied by angelic antiphony (Isaiah 6:2–4).

Psalm 139 stands out as one of the psalms that not only captures some of the most profound attributes of God but also how those doctrines ought to undergird the rhythmic meter of faith.

Take a few moments to turn to Psalm 139 and read it to yourself and then aloud. Use the time to listen to the poetry and expressions as if you're seeing it for the very first time.

What phrases or expressions are most meaningful to you? Explain your response as transparently as possible.

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## Quotable

*I don't know  
of a better statement  
in all the Bible to  
reassure us of  
God's involvement  
in our lives than  
the one hundred  
thirty-ninth psalm.*

— Charles R. Swindoll





Each hymn or psalm was composed with a specific purpose—either as personal prayer or expression of praise, or as an anthem to be used in the corporate Hebrew worship experience.

Look closely at the words in your Bible printed at the very top of the psalm. You will find an inscription, printed in a small font that offers insight into the origin and purpose of the psalm.

Who wrote Psalm 139? And for what purpose was it composed?

Make your way through the psalm, and this time make some notes about any major themes or ideas that you see. Use one-word or two-word descriptions of each theme or idea.



### Your Turn in the Scriptures

Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture are the attributes of God more clearly on display than in the refrains of Psalm 139. Let's take a closer look at how each section develops and examine the attributes in each section the prayer-song represents.

#### *God's Omniscience—God Is All-Knowing*

Read Psalm 139:1–6. Describe the many ways David explained the all-knowing nature of God. List all the aspects of God's omniscience found in these verses.



Read Isaiah 49:15–16. Pay close attention to who is speaking to whom. Using a commentary of the Old Testament or a theological dictionary of the Old Testament, try to discover the context of these two verses.

What is being revealed about the nature of God?

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How does this passage compare or contrast with what is being expressed in Psalm 139:1–6? Do you see any similar images or language? If so, what do you see?

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How do Isaiah's words help explain the meaning of Psalm 139:1–6?

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SERMON NOTE: If you were delivering a sermon on Psalm 139:1–6, for instance, and making a point on the attribute of God's omniscience, you might say, "The fact that God is all-knowing ought to bring us great reassurance in times of uncertainty. It's not merely a cold, tested doctrine but a powerful truth we can cling to when we're troubled." Then you could illustrate that by having the congregation turn to Isaiah 49:15–16 and making the point: "God is not just all-knowing, but because He knows everything about us, He cares for us even more compassionately and deeply than a mother for her nursing baby." See how that works?

Now go through the remaining sections of Psalm 139, and study the corresponding characteristics of God represented in each. Follow the process modeled above based on verses 1–6 for each remaining section. Use the prompts as a guide as you study each section, support what you find with a correlating passage, and then make a sentence or two of personal application.



# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Our Greatest Reassurance

*Psalm 139*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

*God's Omnipresence — God Is Ever-Present*

*Psalm 139:7–12*

Observations from these verses:

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In what ways did David describe God's omnipresence?

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What significant images did David employ to express this truth?

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Correlating passage: \_\_\_\_\_

How does it relate to Psalm 139:7–12?

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Principle(s) for application:

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*God's Omnipotence — God Is All-Powerful*

*Psalm 139:13–18*

Observations from these verses:

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In what ways did David describe God's omnipotence?

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What significant images did David employ to express this truth?

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Correlating passage: \_\_\_\_\_

How does it relate to Psalm 139:13–18?

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Principle(s) for application:

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*God's Faithfulness—God Is Perfectly Just and Good*

*Psalm 139:19–24*

Observations from these verses:

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In what ways did David describe God's faithfulness?

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What significant images did David employ to express this truth?

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Correlating passage: \_\_\_\_\_

How does it relate to Psalm 139:19–24?

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Principle(s) for application:

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### A FINAL PRAYER

Write out your own prayerful response to what you have discovered about God from your study of Psalm 139. Use the space below, or write your prayer in your journal.



# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Our Greatest Reassurance

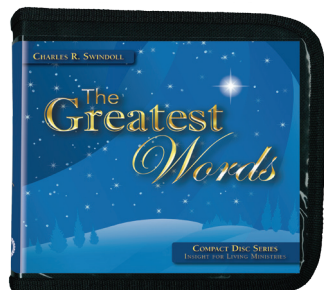
*Psalm 139*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

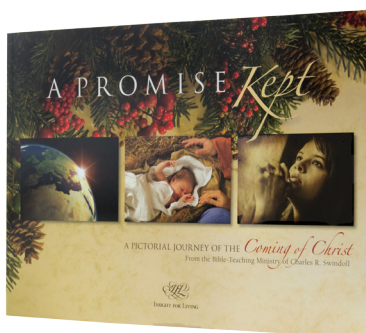
STUDY



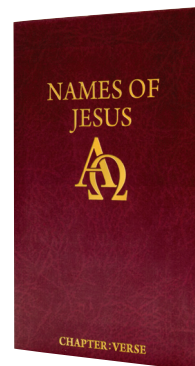
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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## God's Greatest Gift

John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY



### LET'S BEGIN HERE

If someone were to ask you to put in your own words the message of the gospel, what would you say? How would you respond? You could tell a story about what God has done for you—in effect, offering your personal testimony. Or you could explain the message of salvation using an image or illustration—like when you explain something complex to a curious child. God ultimately chose to reveal the fullness of the Gospel in the person of His Son, Jesus. That's what the Christmas season centers on. Yet God's greatest gift is described in a very few words in John 3:16: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life" (NLT).

Let's look closely at this brief expression that carries such long-standing significance to all of us—especially during the holiday season.



### Getting Started: God's Greatest Gift

Take a few minutes to read some introductory material from a Bible commentary on John's gospel or from the introduction to the book in your study Bible. Make a few notes that you think may help you in your study of John 3.

The gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, were primarily theologians, not historians. Though they compiled historical events, they each emphasized major theological themes centered on the person, life, and ministry of Jesus.

What would you say is the main theme of the gospel of John? Explain how you found your answer.

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## Quotable

*It's not so much  
a romantic or  
affectionate love  
that compelled  
God. God made up  
His mind to love  
the world in Christ.*

— Charles R. Swindoll



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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## God's Greatest Gift

*John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

Now read through John 3 in its entirety. As you do, circle any repeated words or more significant theological ideas, as well as any individuals that appear in the chapter. What are the primary stories in John 3? In what ways are the two stories related?

Using a Bible dictionary or theological dictionary of the New Testament, read the entry for the term *gospel*. Make some notes below about what you discover.

### Your Turn in the Scriptures

Often when studying a very familiar passage such as John 3:16, it helps to consider it from a different angle. Using your Bible, take some time to map out how the translation reads. Pay close attention to individual words—specifically action verbs and their objects—the purpose they serve in the phrases, and how these words connect ideas and themes. Study the following example:



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# THE GREATEST WORDS

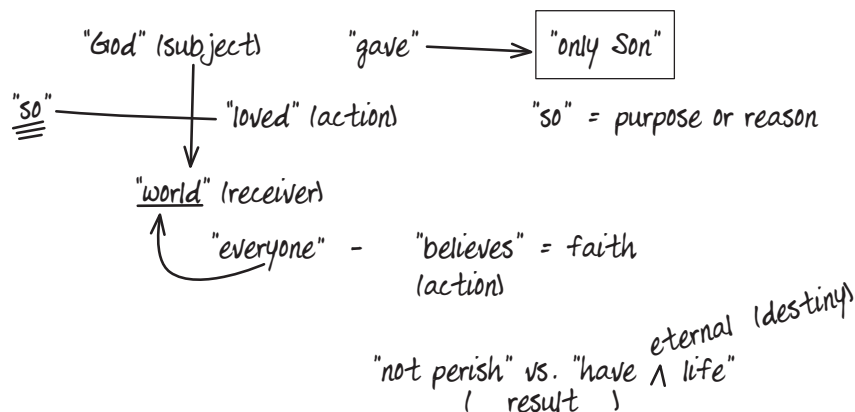
## God's Greatest Gift

John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 NLT)



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Look closely at this list of phrases:

- God loved
- He gave
- Everyone who believes
- Will not perish
- Will have eternal life

What are some things you could conclude about God's gift to us, based on these phrases? List as many as you can. (HINT: These can become the bases for applications you might include in a Bible-study lesson, sermon, or teaching outline.)

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_



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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## God's Greatest Gift

*John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

Now read John 3:10–14. Remember: Jesus was speaking to a Jewish expert in the Hebrew Scriptures. It might be helpful for you to look up the name *Nicodemus* in your Bible dictionary for a brief introduction to him and his standing in the religious community of that day.

How did Jesus refer to Nicodemus? What concern did He express about Nicodemus?

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How did Jesus respond when Nicodemus questioned His teaching?

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In John 3:14, Jesus made reference to a story from the life of Moses. Using the cross references in the margin of your Bible or by consulting your Bible commentary, what Old Testament story did Jesus refer to? Where in the Old Testament is that story located?

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Go to that story in the Old Testament and read it carefully. Describe briefly the context.

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Carefully consider why Jesus used this particular story to answer Nicodemus' question. Hint: There may be several reasons.

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# THE GREATEST WORDS

## God's Greatest Gift

*John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 9:15*

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

In what way do you feel Jesus compared Moses' lifting up the serpent in the wilderness to Him being lifted up? What might He have had in mind in saying, "The Son of Man must be lifted up"?

In what ways do you now see the connection between Nicodemus' question to Jesus, Jesus' reflecting on the story of Moses lifting up the serpent, and the very familiar words in John 3:16 about God's greatest gift?

### *Finding Yourself in the Story*

Placing yourself in the story of Scripture helps you to apply truth to your own life.

In what ways can you relate to Nicodemus and his doubts about Jesus?

Has there been a time in your life when your questions for God have led you to a deeper knowledge of Him? If so, describe that experience.



### A FINAL PRAYER

*Lord, how thankful I am today for Your wonderful gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. At this time of year, help me to be a thoughtful and engaged listener to the questions of people who have not yet received You. Open their hearts to Your love and to the gift of Your Son, Jesus, whom I love and adore. Amen.*



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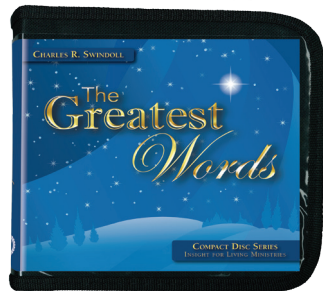
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# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY



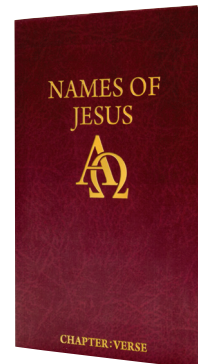
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### LET'S BEGIN HERE

Living without hope is like sailing on the open ocean with no wind. It's hard to get going with nothing driving us toward our destination.

Thankfully, as believers we have a hope that doesn't leave us adrift: God's error-free, inspired Word. As we face an increasingly hostile world, not to mention the normal trials of life, there's nothing we need more than hope. And not the kind of false optimism that clings to comfort and material ease but hope that transcends our earthly limitations and that leads us through death's door to resurrection!



### Getting Started: God's Greatest Gift

Every New Year, many of us hang a new calendar on the wall, with no marks except for special holidays preprinted for convenience. The remaining white space is left to be filled in with events that have not yet occurred. The same is true of the future. We simply do not know what tomorrow holds. Yet the Word of God encourages us to face that uncertainty with a hope-filled confidence in God's preordained plan. We call that simply walking by faith and not sight. The twin ingredient of faith is hope. And that's no truer than in Paul's words about the future found in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Turn to that passage in the New Testament, and take a few minutes to read through 1 Thessalonians 4.

Though the word *rapture* never occurs in the Bible, it comes from the phrase in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 translated "caught up." And though the rapture hasn't occurred yet, Paul made clear this significant event could happen at any moment.

If you have a Bible dictionary, look up the word *rapture*. How would you explain this biblical event to your ten-year-old son or daughter? (Hint: You'd want to explain it in a way that instills hope not fear.)

## Quotable

*There is  
nothing, I mean  
NOTHING,  
like good theology  
to take away  
your fears.*

— Charles R. Swindoll





# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Believers' Greatest Hope

1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY

Write down at least three ways your hope in the rapture can affect your daily life. Look closely over the verses from 1 Thessalonians 4 to help you frame your response.

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Turn to John 14:1–3, paying close attention to Jesus' words. Remember: Reading a few verses at the end of the preceding chapter often provides helpful insight on the context of the new chapter's theme. Take a few minutes to review the end of John 13. What clues do you find that help you understand John's emphasis on hope at the beginning of chapter 14?

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Based on John 14:1–3, who will experience the hope of heaven? How can your hope in Christ's coming equip you to encourage others who grieve the deaths of Christian loved ones?

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Read Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. Think about it! Isaiah foretold the birth of Christ approximately 700 years beforehand. What can you conclude about the accuracy and reliability of God's Word? Can you trust what Scripture says about the rapture?

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S04  
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### Your Turn in the Scriptures

Before you dig into 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, look at James 4:13–16. Write down your observations about this passage. How does James 4 relate to 1 Thessalonians 4?

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What does James 4:13–16 reveal about human nature? How about the nature of God?

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### *Correlating passage:*

How does Luke 12:13–20 relate to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18? How does Luke develop the theme of the problem of pride?

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Reread James 4:13–16 slowly. Before you do, ask the Lord to examine your heart. Describe how you go about making important decisions for you or your family. To what degree do you rely upon the supernatural resources of prayer and searching the Scriptures to help guide your plans? Try to be as specific and transparent as possible in your response.

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Keep in mind, the more personal and transparent your reflection is on your own approach to life, the more pointed and practical your ministry will be when given the opportunity to teach others from this passage.



Now pause to reflect on James 4:15–16. Think of a time when your plans didn't work out the way you had envisioned. How did you react? How were others in your life impacted by the results?

Now, back to 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. The apostle Paul wrote his letters, recorded in the New Testament, for several reasons:

- To share theological teaching with new believers
- To help Christians apply those teachings to their lives
- To correct wrong beliefs about God and His Word

In the case of this passage, Paul felt compelled to correct erroneous teachings regarding believers who had died prior to Jesus' return.

Take some time to slowly read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Write down some observations about the sequence of events in this passage.

Read verse 14. What event grounds your confidence in your future resurrection and the resurrection of all believers? Why?



How did Paul connect the grief that accompanies death with our hope as believers? In other words, what does it mean to grieve with hope? What awaits those who have “fallen asleep in Jesus”?

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Read 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17. How do these verses make you feel about death? Write down several phrases to capture your feelings.

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#### **Correlating passage:**

How does this passage relate to 1 Thessalonians 5:10–11?

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What principles from this study can you apply to your life this week?

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In 1 Corinthians 15:51–55, the apostle Paul reminded his fellow believers (including us!), dearly loved by God, that we have hope beyond death. Paul passionately explained that at the rapture God will exchange our old, earthly bodies for new, heavenly ones, and that we will live in the Lord’s presence forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Such a wonderful message of hope we have to share!



Write down the name of a believer who needs to hear the encouragement Paul offered in 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18. Pray for this believer, and commit to share with him or her what you have learned. Send this person a text or a Facebook message reminding him or her of your prayerful support.



### A FINAL PRAYER

Write a prayer of thanksgiving to God for the hope in the rapture. Use the space below, or write your prayer in your journal.



# THE GREATEST WORDS

## Believers' Greatest Hope

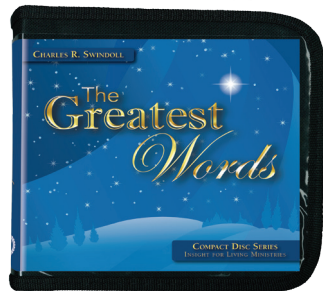
1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

# SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

## STUDY



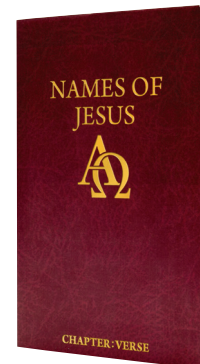
### Tools for Digging Deeper



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For the 2016 broadcast, this Searching the Scriptures study was developed by Mark Tobey in collaboration with Charles R. Swindoll based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts.



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