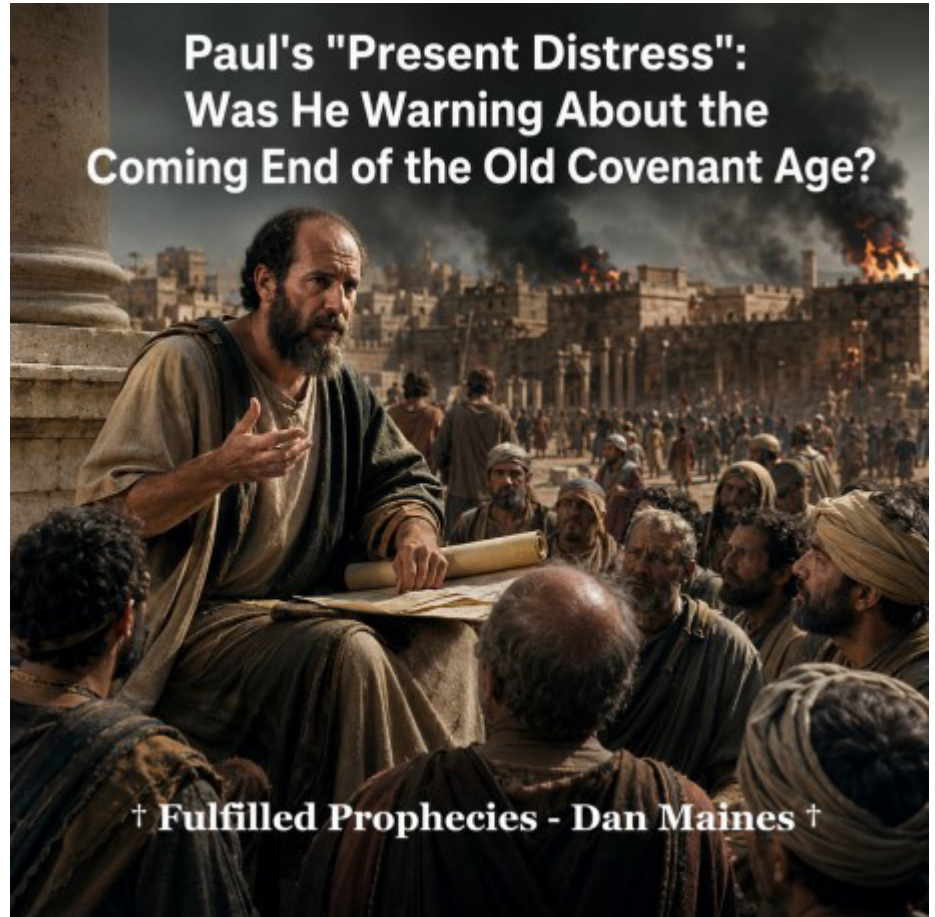


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Paul's "Present Distress": Was He Warning About the Coming End of the Old Covenant Age?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† One of the most overlooked passages in the New Testament is Paul's counsel concerning marriage in 1 Corinthians 7. Many readers assume Paul was giving timeless advice that applies equally to every generation. However, Paul repeatedly grounded his instructions in the circumstances of his own day. He spoke of a present distress, declared that the time was

short, and announced that the fashion of this world was passing away. Those are covenantal time statements that point to an approaching historical event, not an indefinite future.

† The question isn't whether Jerusalem's destruction would affect only those living in Judea. The question is whether the entire Old Covenant system centered in Jerusalem was about to come to its divinely appointed end. Every congregation founded upon the gospel, whether in Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus, or Rome, understood that the temple represented the heart of the Old Covenant order. When that order ended, redemptive history reached its covenantal fulfillment.

† Paul's words make perfect sense when read alongside Jesus' own predictions that all these things would occur within that generation. The urgency throughout the New Testament wasn't based on general uncertainty about life, it was based upon the approaching fulfillment of God's covenant promises.

1 Corinthians 7:25-26

Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I am offering direction as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think, then, that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

† Paul specifically connected his advice to the present distress, not to every generation of Christians. The wording points to a crisis already developing in his own lifetime. (1 Corinthians 7:26)

† Jesus had already warned His disciples that before Jerusalem's destruction they would experience persecution, imprisonment, betrayal, famine, and tribulation throughout the Roman world. (Matthew 24:9-13; Luke 21:10-19)

† Because those events were rapidly approaching, Paul encouraged believers to avoid unnecessary changes that could complicate life during an extraordinary period of covenant transition. (Hebrews 10:25-37)

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

But this I say, brothers, the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who have wives should be as though they had none; and those who weep, as though they did not weep; and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the present form of this world is passing away.

† Paul wasn't teaching believers to neglect their families or daily responsibilities. He was emphasizing that earthly circumstances must not distract them from the approaching fulfillment of God's redemptive plan. (Colossians 3:1-4)

† The expression the time is shortened is another first-century time statement that matches the urgency found throughout the New Testament. (Romans 13:11-12; James 5:8-9)

† The fashion of this world refers to the visible order of the Old Covenant age that was about to disappear, not the destruction of the physical planet. (Hebrews 8:13)

Romans 13:11-12

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let's rid ourselves of the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

† Paul reminded the Roman believers that they were living in the season of fulfillment. Their salvation, the full realization of God's covenant promises, was nearer than when they first believed. (Romans 13:11)

† The night refers to the fading Old Covenant order, while the day points to the full establishment of Christ's kingdom through the completion of God's redemptive plan. (Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 12:22-24)

† This is another first-century time statement that perfectly matches Paul's words that the time was short. These passages speak with one unified voice. (Romans 13:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29)

Matthew 24:34

Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

† Jesus established the time frame for the fulfillment of His prophecy. The generation hearing His words would witness these events. (Matthew 24:34)

† Paul's urgency perfectly agrees with Jesus' prophecy. Neither expected thousands of years to pass before these promises were fulfilled. (Matthew 16:27-28)

† The approaching end wasn't the end of the material world, it was the end of the covenant age centered in Jerusalem and its temple. (Luke 21:20-22)

Hebrews 8:13

When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is

about to disappear.

† Hebrews declares that the Old Covenant was already growing old and was about to disappear. That statement was written before Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. (Hebrews 8:13)

† When the temple fell in AD 70, the sacrifices, priesthood, and ceremonial system ended exactly as God had foretold. (Daniel 9:27)

† Paul's statement that the fashion of this world was passing away agrees perfectly with Hebrews' declaration that the Old Covenant was ready to vanish away. (1 Corinthians 7:31; Hebrews 8:13)

Hebrews 10:25-37

not abandoning our own meeting together, as is the habit of some people, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has ignored the Law of Moses is put to death without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severe punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made

a public spectacle through insults and distress, and partly by becoming companions with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better and lasting possession. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

For yet in a very little while,

He who is coming will come, and will not delay.

† Hebrews confirms the same urgency Paul expressed in 1 Corinthians 7. The readers could already see the day drawing near, proving that the fulfillment was approaching in their own lifetime. (Hebrews 10:25; 1 Corinthians 7:29)

† The judgment under discussion is the covenant judgment Jesus foretold against Jerusalem. The warning was directed to first-century believers living during the closing years of the Old Covenant age. (Luke 21:20-22; Matthew 24:34)

† The statement, yet a very little while, leaves no room for a delay of thousands of years. It agrees with Paul's declaration that the time was short and that the fashion of this world was passing away. (Hebrews 10:37; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

Luke 21:20-22

But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is near. Then those who are in Judea must flee to the mountains, and those who are inside the city must leave, and those who are in the country must not enter the city; because these are days of punishment, so that all things which have been written will be fulfilled.

† Jesus identified the destruction of Jerusalem as the fulfillment of all things written concerning the covenant judgment upon Israel. (Luke 21:20-22)

† Corinth may have been hundreds of miles from Jerusalem, but every congregation was affected because the temple was the center of the Old Covenant system. Once God removed that system, every church throughout the Roman Empire entered the fully established New Covenant age together. (Hebrews 8:13; Ephesians 2:13-22; Hebrews 12:22-24)

† The Roman Empire experienced unrest, persecution, political upheaval, and war during the years leading to AD 70. The churches across the empire were living through the very distress Paul described. (Acts 18:1-2; Romans 8:35-39)

Historical References

† Josephus describes the years leading up to Jerusalem's destruction as a time of civil unrest, famine, false prophets, political turmoil, and unimaginable suffering, confirming the crisis Jesus and Paul anticipated.

† Tacitus records widespread disturbances throughout the Roman Empire during Nero's reign, demonstrating that the years before AD 70 were marked by instability far beyond Judea.

† Eusebius records that Christians remembered Jesus' warning and fled Jerusalem before its destruction, showing that the early church understood these prophecies as imminent first-century events.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We no longer live under the shadow of an Old Covenant waiting to disappear because Christ has completely fulfilled it.

(Hebrews 12:22-24)

† Our confidence rests in Christ's finished work, not in a future destruction of Jerusalem or a rebuilt temple. (John 19:30; Hebrews 10:12-18)

† Paul's words remind us to keep our priorities centered on Christ rather than becoming consumed by temporary earthly concerns. (Colossians 3:1-4)

† Understanding the original audience and historical setting protects us from moving first-century time statements into our future. (1 Corinthians 7:26-31; Matthew 24:34)

Q & A Appendix

Q: Was Paul expecting the end of the physical world?

A: No. Paul said the fashion of this world was passing away, referring to the covenant order associated with the Old Covenant, not the destruction of the planet. Hebrews likewise says the Old Covenant was ready to vanish away. (1 Corinthians 7:31; Hebrews 8:13)

Q: Why would the fall of Jerusalem matter to believers living in Corinth?

A: Jerusalem and its temple stood at the center of the Old Covenant system. Their destruction publicly ended that covenant order for every believer, regardless of where they lived. The distress and persecution leading up to AD 70 also affected churches throughout the Roman Empire. (Luke 21:20-22; Hebrews 8:13; Acts 18:1-2)

Q: Does this passage teach that Christians shouldn't marry today?

A: No. Paul's advice was based upon the present distress facing the first-century church. He specifically tied his counsel to that unique historical situation rather than establishing a universal rule for all generations. (1 Corinthians 7:26; 1 Corinthians 7:28)

Q: If Paul was referring to Jerusalem's destruction, why didn't he simply mention Jerusalem by name?

A: Paul often referred to events his readers already understood without repeating every detail. The Corinthians knew about Jesus' prophecies, the growing persecution, and the coming judgment upon the Old Covenant system. By speaking of the present distress, the time being short, and the fashion of this world passing away, Paul used the same language of imminence found throughout the New Testament. (1 Corinthians 7:26-31; Matthew 24:34; Hebrews 10:25-37)

Q: Doesn't "the present order of this world was passing away." mean the end of the physical universe?

A: No. The Greek word translated "world" here is not referring to the destruction of the planet but to the present order of things. Paul was speaking about the passing away of the Old Covenant age, which was centered in Jerusalem, its temple, priesthood, and sacrifices. Hebrews says that covenant was ready to vanish away, and Jesus declared that all these things would be fulfilled within that generation. (1 Corinthians 7:31; Hebrews 8:13; Luke 21:20-22; Matthew 24:34)

Q: How could the destruction of Jerusalem affect believers living nearly 800 miles away in Corinth?

A: Jerusalem wasn't just another city. It was the covenant center of Judaism where the temple, priesthood, sacrifices, and feast days were administered. Every church founded by the apostles lived during the transition from the Old Covenant to the

New. When Jerusalem and the temple fell in AD 70, God publicly ended the Old Covenant system for every believer, regardless of where they lived. That is why Paul's urgency extended beyond Judea to churches throughout the Roman Empire. (Hebrews 8:13; Luke 21:20-22; Ephesians 2:13-22; Hebrews 12:22-24)

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies. †

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Source Index

† 1 Corinthians 7:25-26, 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Matthew 24:34, Hebrews 8:13, Romans 13:11-12, Hebrews 10:25-37, Luke 21:20-22

† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews, Books 4-7; Tacitus, The Histories, Book 5; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5

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