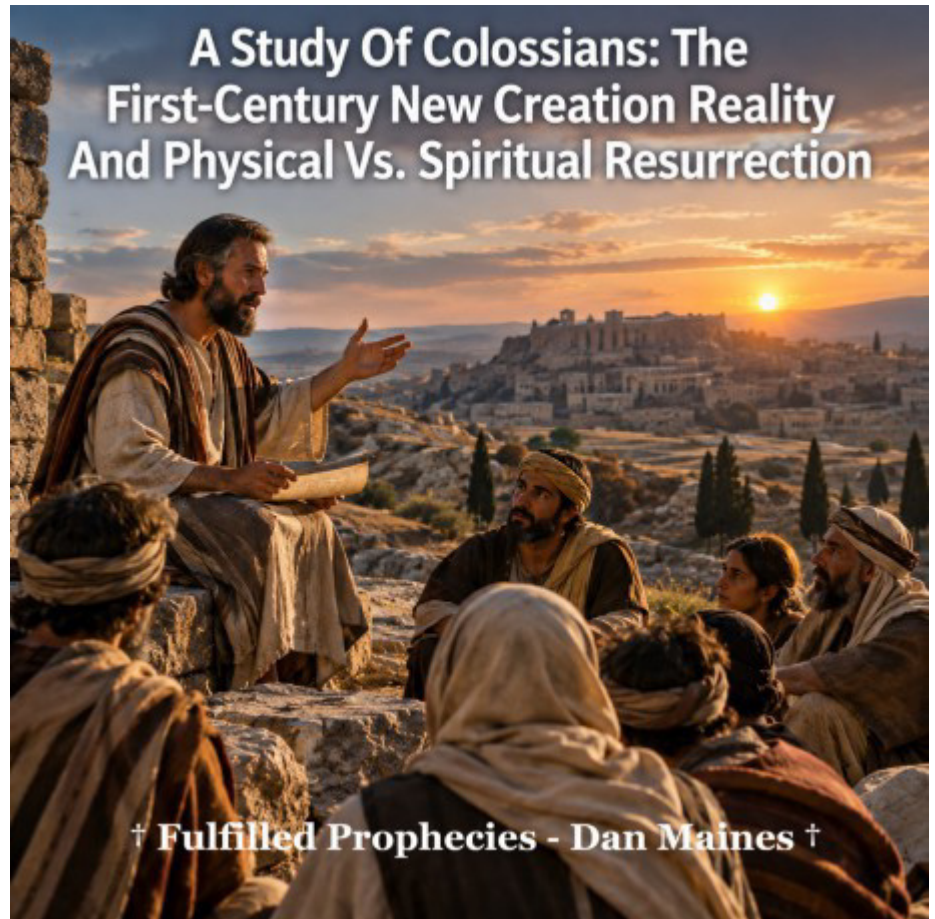


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A Study Of Colossians: The First-Century New Creation Reality And Physical Vs. Spiritual Resurrection



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Colossians gives us one of the clearest pictures in the New Testament of resurrection life as a present spiritual reality. Paul wasn't writing to physically dead people waiting to come out of graves. He was writing to living believers who had already died with Christ, had already been buried with Christ, had already been raised with Christ, and had already entered a new manner of life in Him.

† This is important because many Christians automatically assume that resurrection language must describe dead physical bodies coming back to biological life. Colossians doesn't allow us to make that assumption. Paul repeatedly uses death, burial, resurrection, circumcision, putting off the old man, and putting on the new man to describe a covenantal and spiritual transformation that was already taking place among living believers.

† The new creation wasn't about replacing the physical universe. It was about reconciliation to God through Christ and the creation of a new covenant people in Him. Paul could tell living Christians that they had died and had been raised because he was speaking about their spiritual and covenantal identity, not the condition of their physical bodies (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:5-6).

† Colossians also places this transformation within the first-century transition from the old covenant world to the completed new covenant reality. The believers had already received the spiritual reality in Christ, while Paul could still speak of its approaching manifestation in glory (Colossians 3:4; Hebrews 8:13; 1 Peter 4:7).

Colossians 1:13-14

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

† Paul didn't tell the Colossians that they were waiting for a future kingdom to begin. God had already delivered them from the authority of darkness and transferred them into Christ's kingdom.

† Notice the completed language. They had been delivered and transferred. Their location on the earth hadn't changed, but their covenantal position before God had changed completely (John 5:24; Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This is new creation language. The change wasn't geographical or biological. It was spiritual, covenantal, and

centered in Christ.

Colossians 1:18

He is also the head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

† Jesus' physical resurrection is foundational. He truly died, was buried, and rose from the dead. The fulfilled view doesn't deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:39; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

† Christ's physical resurrection and the believer's resurrection in Christ shouldn't automatically be treated as identical in nature every time resurrection language appears. Context determines how resurrection language is being used.

† Christ is the firstborn from the dead and the Head of His body, the church. His resurrection secured the life that His people possess in Him (Romans 6:8-11; Revelation 1:5).

Colossians 2:11-12

and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision performed without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

† Paul deliberately distinguishes spiritual reality from a physical operation. Their circumcision was not performed by human hands. The transformation he described happened through union with Christ.

† These physically living believers had been buried with Christ and raised with Him. They hadn't entered physical graves and come back out. Paul was describing their participation in Christ's death and resurrection through faith (Romans 6:4-6).

† This is one of the strongest passages for understanding Paul's resurrection language. If living people could already be described as buried and raised with Christ, resurrection language can't automatically be restricted to physical corpses

leaving graves.

Colossians 2:13

And when you were dead in your wrongdoings and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our wrongdoings,

† The Colossians had been dead while they were physically alive. Their death was spiritual, not biological.

† In exactly the same passage, Paul says God made them alive together with Christ. If their death was spiritual, their being made alive must be understood within that same spiritual and redemptive context (Ephesians 2:1, 5-6).

† This makes Paul's point difficult to miss. They were physically alive while dead in sin, and they remained physically alive when God made them alive with Christ. What changed was their relationship to God.

Colossians 2:20

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as,

† Paul directly tells living believers that they had died with Christ. Their physical hearts hadn't stopped beating. Their physical bodies hadn't died.

† Their death with Christ meant separation from the former order that held authority over them. They weren't to return to regulations that belonged to what they had died to (Galatians 4:3-5; Romans 7:4-6).

† Death language in Paul must therefore be interpreted by context. Physical death is real, but every reference to death isn't physical death.

Colossians 3:1-3

Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is

hidden with Christ in God.

† Paul couldn't have made the spiritual resurrection reality much clearer. He tells living Christians, you were raised with Christ, and then tells those same Christians, you died.

† Their physical bodies were standing, walking, eating, working, and reading Paul's letter. Yet Paul said they had died and had been raised.

† Their resurrection was already a reality because their life was now hidden with Christ in God. This is resurrection life before physical death (John 5:24-25; John 11:25-26).

† The resurrection Paul describes here isn't a future reconstruction of their physical bodies. It was their present participation in the life of the risen Christ.

Colossians 3:4

When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

† Paul had just said that the Colossians were already raised with Christ, yet there was still a manifestation in glory before them. Present resurrection life and future first-century manifestation weren't contradictions.

† This fits the New Testament transition period. The new covenant life had been inaugurated through Christ, while the old covenant age was approaching its decisive end (Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 9:8-10).

† The manifestation of Christ in glory belongs naturally with the first-century expectation repeatedly expressed by Jesus and His apostles (Matthew 16:27-28; Matthew 24:30, 34; Hebrews 10:37; James 5:8-9).

Colossians 3:9-11

Do not lie to one another, since you stripped off the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created it - a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, but Christ is all, and in all.

† Here Paul gives us the new creation reality in unmistakable language. The old man was being put off and the new man had been put on.

† The new man isn't a newly created physical body. Paul was describing a new identity and a new humanity in Christ (Ephesians 2:15; Ephesians 4:22-24).

† Paul immediately explains the corporate nature of this new humanity. Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, slave and free were brought together in Christ.

† This is why new creation and resurrection belong together. The old identity associated with sin, condemnation, separation, and the former covenant order was passing away, while the new humanity was being revealed in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:28).

Colossians 3:10

and have put on the new self, which is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created it

† Paul's language reaches back to creation, but he applies it to people already living on the earth. They were being renewed according to the image of their Creator.

† New creation isn't the destruction of planet Earth followed by the creation of another physical planet. In Paul's teaching, new creation begins with people recreated and renewed in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:24).

† Adamic alienation gives way to life in Christ. The focus is reconciliation, righteousness, knowledge, and restored fellowship with God, not the replacement of the physical universe (Romans 5:17-19).

Colossians 3:12-14

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also. In addition to all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

† Resurrection life wasn't merely a theological concept for Paul. It produced a transformed manner of living.

† Those who had been raised with Christ were to live according to their new identity. Compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, and love were evidence of the life they possessed in Him.

† The new creation is spiritual, but spiritual doesn't mean imaginary. It produces real changes in real people living real lives.

Physical Resurrection And Spiritual Resurrection

† Scripture clearly records physical resurrection. Jesus physically rose from the dead, and people such as Lazarus were physically restored to biological life (John 11:43-44; Luke 24:39).

† Scripture also clearly uses resurrection language spiritually. The Colossians were dead in trespasses, made alive with Christ, buried with Christ, raised with Christ, and told that they had died with Christ while they remained physically alive.

† We shouldn't force every resurrection passage into the same category. The immediate context must determine whether the writer is describing physical resurrection, spiritual resurrection, covenantal resurrection, or Christ's unique bodily resurrection.

† Colossians demonstrates beyond reasonable dispute that resurrection terminology can describe a present spiritual reality. Any interpretation of resurrection that refuses to recognize this biblical use of the language is incomplete.

Historical References

† Josephus described the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70, including the collapse of the Jewish national and temple order that had dominated first-century Judea. His account provides important historical background for understanding the world in which the New Testament's covenant transition reached its climax.

† Josephus wasn't explaining Paul's theology of resurrection, but his record shows that the first-century generation

experienced the historical removal of Jerusalem and its temple system exactly within the period in which the New Testament writers expected the approaching end of the age (Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-7).

† Eusebius later recorded the early Christian tradition that believers in Jerusalem departed before the city's destruction and settled at Pella. His account preserves the early church's memory of the first-century judgment upon Jerusalem (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7).

† These historical writers don't establish the doctrine. Scripture establishes the doctrine. Their writings provide historical testimony concerning the first-century setting in which the New Testament's time statements were fulfilled.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need to wait for resurrection life to begin. Everyone who belongs to Christ possesses life in Him. Our relationship with God isn't based on the old covenant system, an earthly temple, animal sacrifices, or membership in physical Israel.

† We live in the completed new covenant reality that the first-century believers were entering. Christ is our life, and God's people are His dwelling place (Ephesians 2:19-22; Hebrews 12:22-24).

† Physical death doesn't separate the believer from Christ. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and those who believe in Him possess eternal life (John 11:25-26).

† Our hope isn't centered on escaping planet Earth or waiting for God to establish another covenant age. Our hope is Christ Himself and the life, reconciliation, forgiveness, and fellowship with God that are found in Him.

† Colossians calls us to live like people who have been raised with Christ. We set our minds on the things above, put away the works of the old man, put on the new man, forgive one another, love one another, and live from the reality of Christ within us.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does Colossians teach that believers had already been

raised with Christ?

A: Yes. Paul explicitly told physically living believers that they had been buried with Christ and raised with Him, and later said, you were raised together with Christ (Colossians 2:12; 3:1).

Q: Were the Colossians physically dead when Paul said they had been made alive?

A: No. They were physically alive. Their former death was through trespasses, and God made them alive together with Christ (Colossians 2:13; Ephesians 2:1, 5-6).

Q: Does spiritual resurrection deny that Jesus physically rose from the dead?

A: Absolutely not. Jesus truly died and physically rose from the dead. Colossians identifies Him as the firstborn from the dead and Head of the church (Colossians 1:18; Luke 24:39).

Q: Does every use of the word resurrection refer to a physical body leaving a grave?

A: No. Colossians proves that resurrection language can describe living people being raised spiritually with Christ (Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1-3).

Q: How does resurrection connect with the new creation?

A: Those raised with Christ put off the old man and put on the new man, who is being renewed according to the image of the Creator. This is the new humanity created in Christ (Colossians 3:9-11; Ephesians 2:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

Q: Was this new creation reality already present in the first century?

A: Yes. Paul didn't tell the Colossians merely that they would someday become new. He told them they had already died, had already been raised with Christ, and had already put on the new man (Colossians 2:20; 3:1-3, 9-11).

Q: What does this mean for believers today?

A: We live in the completed new covenant reality. Our life is in Christ, and we live from resurrection life by putting on compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forgiveness, and love (Colossians 3:12-14).

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

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Source Index

† Colossians 1:13-14, 18; 2:11-13, 20; 3:1-4, 9-14

† Josephus, Wars of the Jews, Books 5-7; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7

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