Fulfilled Prophecies

Paul's Writings On The Resurrection: Were The Rapture And Resurrection One Future Event?

By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† Paul's writings about the resurrection are often read as though he were describing events thousands of years beyond his own generation. Dispensationalism commonly places the resurrection and the gathering of believers into a future end-times program, but Paul's own words must first be understood within his first-century audience, covenant setting, and statements of expectation.

† Paul didn't invent a new resurrection doctrine. He preached the hope promised to Israel, centered completely in Jesus Christ and reaching its fulfillment through Him (Acts 24:14-15; Acts 26:6-8).
† Paul connected resurrection with the transition from Adam to Christ, death to life, corruption to incorruption, and the old covenant age to the completed reign of Christ. His emphasis wasn't Christians escaping planet earth, but God's people being brought into the completed life and victory of the risen Christ (Romans 5:17-21; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
† First Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 aren't competing resurrection programs. They describe the same first-century hope from different perspectives, and neither passage gives us permission to move Paul's expectation thousands of years beyond the people to whom he wrote.

Acts 24:14-15
But I confess this to you, that in accordance with the Way, which they call a sect, I do serve the God of our fathers, believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and is written in the Prophets; having a hope in God, which these men cherish themselves, that there shall certainly be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.
† Paul identified his resurrection hope as something already promised in the Law and the Prophets. He wasn't introducing a secret resurrection unknown to Israel's Scriptures (Daniel 12:1-3).
† This is critical because Daniel connected resurrection with Israel's time of unparalleled distress and with the completion of the shattering of the power of the holy people (Daniel 12:1, 7).
† Paul's resurrection doctrine therefore belongs within Israel's promised covenant consummation, not within a separate prophetic program created for Christians living thousands of years later (Acts 26:6-8).

1 Corinthians 15:20-23
But the fact is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first

fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man death came, by a Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming,

† Christ's physical resurrection is the foundation and guarantee of the resurrection victory Paul proclaimed. Jesus truly came out of the grave, and because He lives, death couldn't retain dominion over those belonging to Him (Romans 6:9).

† Paul's contrast is Adam and Christ. Adam represents death, condemnation, and the old humanity, while Christ represents righteousness, life, and the new humanity (Romans 5:18-19).

† The resurrection hope can't be reduced to corpses leaving graves. Paul's larger theology concerns people passing from the reign of death in Adam into the reign of life in Christ (Romans 5:21; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

† Christ was the firstfruits. The firstfruits weren't separated from the harvest by thousands of years. They guaranteed that the harvest belonging to the same redemptive work would follow (Leviticus 23:10-11).

1 Corinthians 15:25-26

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.

† Paul said Christ was already reigning and would continue reigning until His enemies were placed beneath His feet. His reign wasn't waiting to begin in our future (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34-36).

† Death is called the last enemy in Paul's resurrection argument. This is the death introduced through Adam and answered through Christ's life-giving work (Romans 5:12, 17).

† Revelation describes Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire when judgment was completed. John's vision therefore parallels Paul's expectation of resurrection victory over death (Revelation 20:13-14).

1 Corinthians 15:51-52
Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.
† Paul included himself and his contemporary believers in this expectation when he said, We all shall not sleep. His language deserves to be read naturally before assuming that we refers to Christians thousands of years later (1 Thessalonians 4:15).
† The change Paul described belongs to his contrast between corruption and incorruption, dishonor and glory, weakness and power, and the natural body and spiritual body (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).
† Paul's resurrection teaching reaches beyond what happens to an individual physical body. He described the victory of the heavenly Man over the order represented by Adam, with believers bearing the image of the heavenly (1 Corinthians 15:47-49).
† The trumpet imagery also comes directly from Israel's prophetic language concerning God's gathering and kingdom judgment. Paul didn't need a modern dispensational framework to explain imagery his Jewish audience already knew (Isaiah 27:13).

1 Corinthians 15:54-55
But when this perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal puts on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written: "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?"
† Paul explicitly said the resurrection would fulfill what had already been written. He then drew from Israel's prophets concerning God's victory over death (Isaiah 25:8; Hosea 13:14).
† Isaiah's prophecy places the swallowing up of death within the removal of His people's reproach and the establishment of God's promised salvation (Isaiah 25:7-9).
† Paul wasn't describing an unrelated escape from earth. He was announcing the fulfillment of Israel's promised victory

through Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:56-57
The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
† Paul tells us directly what stood behind the resurrection problem: sin, death, and the Law. That covenant connection is frequently overlooked when this chapter is interpreted only as a discussion about physical graves.
† The Law intensified transgression, while Christ brought righteousness and life. Paul develops this same contrast extensively elsewhere (Romans 5:20-21; Romans 7:5-6).
† Victory comes through Jesus Christ, not through removal from planet earth. The resurrection message is ultimately the triumph of Christ over the covenant reign of sin and death.

1 Thessalonians 4:15-17
For we say this to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord.
† Paul again said we who are alive. He was comforting grieving first-century Thessalonian believers about Christians who had already died, not explaining what would happen to a distant generation they knew nothing about (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 18).
† The word commonly translated caught up describes being seized or taken, but the passage itself doesn't use the modern dispensational expression secret rapture or teach that believers disappear from earth before a seven-year tribulation.
† Clouds are repeatedly associated with divine presence and judgment throughout Scripture. God came on clouds in Old Testament judgment language without requiring a physical

descent of God onto the ground (Psalm 18:9-12; Isaiah 19:1).
† Meeting the Lord communicates reception into His victorious presence. Paul's conclusion isn't that believers would permanently live suspended in the atmosphere, but that they would always be with the Lord (John 14:3).
† First Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 share the coming of Christ, resurrection, living believers, the trumpet, and the gathering. There isn't a biblical reason to separate them into unrelated events, but their timing must come from the apostolic writings themselves.

Philippians 3:10-11
that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.
† Paul could speak about resurrection as something into which he was already pressing while physically alive. Knowing Christ meant participating in His death and resurrection life (Romans 6:4-5).
† This doesn't deny the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus. It shows that Christ's physical resurrection produced a much larger redemptive reality for His people (Ephesians 2:5-6).
† Resurrection life wasn't merely about receiving a different physical body. It was participation in the life of the risen Christ.

Romans 6:4-5
Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection,
† Paul described believers as participating in Christ's death and resurrection while they were still physically living. Resurrection language therefore can't automatically be reduced to physical bodies coming out of graves (Colossians 2:12-13).
† The believer's identity had moved from Adam into Christ, from

condemnation into justification, and from death into life (Romans 5:18; Romans 8:1-2).
† This resurrection reality had already begun through Christ and was moving toward the complete fulfillment of the covenant promises Paul preached.

2 Corinthians 5:1-4
For we know that if our earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made by hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed, in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, since in fact after putting it on, we will not be found naked. For indeed, we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.
† Paul's language again centers on being clothed with what comes from God. His hope wasn't nakedness or disembodied existence, but being clothed with the life provided through Christ.
† The expression not made with hands is covenantal language elsewhere in the New Testament, especially when contrasting the old earthly sanctuary with the greater heavenly reality established through Christ (Hebrews 9:11).
† Paul's expectation was that mortality would be swallowed up by life, matching his statement that death would be swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15:54).

2 Timothy 2:17-18
and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have gone astray from the truth, claiming that the resurrection has already taken place; and they are jeopardizing the faith of some.
† Hymenaeus and Philetus weren't condemned because resurrection had to remain thousands of years future. Their error was declaring it already completed while Paul was still teaching that its consummation remained ahead of them.
† Timing matters. Something can be genuinely near without

already being completed. Paul could reject the claim that resurrection had already occurred while continuing to expect Christ's coming and the completion of redemption within the apostolic horizon (Romans 13:11-12).
† This passage therefore doesn't prove that resurrection remains future to us. It proves that it hadn't yet been completed when Paul wrote 2 Timothy.

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 told living first-century Christians that their salvation was nearer than when they first believed. The night wasn't beginning, it was almost over.
† The day wasn't thousands of years away. Paul said it was near. His resurrection expectation must be interpreted consistently with his own statements about the approaching completion of salvation (Hebrews 9:28).
† Moving Paul's expected consummation thousands of years beyond his audience weakens the natural force of already, nearer, far spent, and at hand.

Historical References
† Josephus recorded the catastrophic Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70. His account provides important historical background for understanding the first-century judgment setting surrounding New Testament expectations.
† Eusebius later recorded the tradition that believers in Jerusalem departed for Pella before the war overtook the city. His account demonstrates that early Christians understood Jesus' warnings concerning Jerusalem as having direct relevance to that generation.
† These historical writers don't establish doctrine. Scripture

establishes doctrine. Their writings simply confirm that the first century experienced the covenantal upheaval and judgment that Jesus and the apostles had warned were approaching.

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need to live waiting for a secret rapture to rescue us from the world. Christ has already brought His people from death into life, and our calling is to live faithfully in His kingdom (Colossians 1:13).

† We don't need to place Paul's resurrection hope into an endlessly postponed future. We can recognize the first-century audience and covenant setting while continuing to affirm the historical physical resurrection of Jesus as the foundation of our hope (Romans 1:4).

† When believers physically die today, they aren't waiting in Hades for a future dispensational resurrection program. They belong to Christ and are with Him (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8).

† The resurrection victory means death doesn't separate those in Christ from their Lord. Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in Him lives even if he dies (John 11:25-26).

† Paul wasn't teaching two competing hopes, one resurrection and another unrelated rapture. First Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 describe the same consummating hope using resurrection, gathering, trumpet, transformation, and coming language.

† The critical question isn't whether those passages belong together. The critical question is when Paul expected their fulfillment. His repeated language points his readers back to the apostolic generation and the approaching completion of the covenant age, not to a prophetic timetable beginning two thousand years later.

Q & A Appendix

Q: Did Paul teach that the resurrection and gathering were connected?

A: Yes. First Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 both connect Christ's coming, the dead, living believers, the trumpet, and the gathering or transformation (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Q: Does this deny the physical resurrection of Jesus?
A: No. Paul's entire resurrection message depends upon the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is the firstfruits and the foundation of resurrection life (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Q: Did Paul teach a secret rapture before a seven-year tribulation?
A: Paul never uses that framework in First Thessalonians 4. He describes the Lord's coming, resurrection, trumpet, clouds, gathering, and permanent presence with Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

Q: Why did Paul say we who are alive?
A: Because Paul included himself and his living first-century readers within the expectation he was describing. The same audience expectation appears when he said, We all shall not sleep (1 Corinthians 15:51).

Q: Was resurrection only about physical bodies leaving graves?
A: Paul's teaching is broader. He connects resurrection with Adam and Christ, death and life, corruption and incorruption, and participation in Christ's resurrection life (Romans 5:17-21; Romans 6:4-5).

Q: What about Hymenaeus and Philetus saying the resurrection had already happened?
A: Their error was claiming the resurrection was already completed before its appointed fulfillment. Paul still described salvation as drawing nearer and the day as near in his own generation (Romans 13:11-12).

Q: What does resurrection mean for believers today?
A: Christ has conquered death. Those who belong to Him possess resurrection life now, and physical death doesn't separate them from Him. To depart this life is to be with Christ (Philippians 1:21-23; 2 Corinthians 5:8).

Q: Was there a literal rapture of living believers from the earth in the first century?
A: No. Scripture doesn't record Christians physically disappearing from the earth in AD 70. The fulfilled view doesn't require such an event. Paul's language of being "caught up" describes the gathering of God's people into the presence of Christ at His coming, using the biblical imagery of clouds and meeting the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Matthew 24:30-31).

Q: Why do some preterists believe there was a literal rapture in the first century?
A: Some interpret Paul's words "caught up in the clouds" as requiring a literal physical removal of living believers in AD 70 (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Others understand the language covenantally, especially because clouds repeatedly symbolize God's presence and judgment, and gathering language describes God's people being brought to Christ (Isaiah 19:1; Matthew 24:30-31). Scripture doesn't provide a historical account of thousands of Christians physically disappearing in AD 70.

Q: Doesn't being "caught up" mean believers had to physically leave the earth?
A: No. The emphasis of Paul's statement isn't where believers physically traveled, but with whom they would permanently dwell: "and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). The destination of the passage is ultimately the presence of Christ.

Q: Is heaven a geographical location somewhere above the earth?

A: Scripture doesn't require us to understand heaven as a geographical location somewhere beyond the clouds. Heaven describes God's realm and presence, which isn't measured by earthly geography. Jesus said that no one could come to the Father except through Him, and believers already had access to the Father through Christ (John 14:6; Ephesians 2:18). Being with the Lord is fundamentally about relationship and presence, not traveling a measurable distance into outer space.

Q: Then what does "meet the Lord in the air" mean?
A: Paul's language shouldn't be separated from the prophetic imagery surrounding it, the coming of the Lord, the trumpet, the clouds, resurrection, and gathering (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). The point isn't that Christians would permanently live in earth's atmosphere. Paul immediately explains the result: "and so shall we ever be with the Lord." The emphasis is permanent union with Christ, not a geographical destination in the sky.

Q: If there wasn't a physical rapture, what happened to believers who were alive at Christ's coming?
A: They weren't removed from planet earth. They entered the completed New Covenant reality of Christ's kingdom, while believers who had died were no longer held under the former reign of Death and Hades. The living and the dead were united in the completed victory of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-57; Revelation 20:13-14; Hebrews 12:22-24).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† Acts 24:14-15; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23; 1 Corinthians 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Corinthians 15:54-55; 1 Corinthians 15:56-57; 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; Philippians 3:10-11; Romans 6:4-5; 2 Corinthians 5:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:17-18; Romans 13:11-12

† Josephus, The Wars of the Jews; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History

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