Fulfilled Prophecies

The Rapture: What Did Paul Mean By Being Caught Up In The Air?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† For generations, Christians have been taught that Jesus will return to earth, resurrect dead believers, and physically lift living Christians into the sky. This teaching is commonly called the rapture.

† But is that what the apostle Paul was teaching? Was he describing a future disappearance of Christians from the earth, or was he explaining the fulfillment of God's covenant promises

to believers living in the first century?
† The answer must come from Scripture, not modern prophecy charts, popular books, or religious traditions (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
† Paul wasn't writing to Christians living thousands of years in his future. He was writing to the Thessalonian believers about their deceased brothers and sisters, their hope in Christ, and the coming of the Lord they were expecting (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10; 2:19).
† The central question is simple. What did Paul mean when he said that those who were alive and remained would be caught up together with the resurrected saints to meet the Lord in the air?
† To answer that question, we must examine Paul's audience, his time statements, his resurrection teaching, and the prophetic language he used.

The Concern Of The Thessalonian Believers

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14
But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as indeed the rest of mankind do, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose from the dead, so also God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus.
† Paul's subject wasn't Christians escaping a future worldwide catastrophe. His concern was believers who had died before the anticipated coming of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:18-20).
† The Thessalonians were grieving because they feared their deceased brothers and sisters might miss the promised resurrection and participation in Christ's kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:22-23).
† Paul assured them that physical death hadn't separated these believers from the promises of God. Their hope rested on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:38-39).
† The resurrection of Christ guaranteed the fulfillment of the resurrection promises given to God's covenant people (Acts

26:6-8; 1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

Who Were Those Who Were Alive And Remained?

1 Thessalonians 4:15
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.
† Notice Paul's words, "we that are alive." He included himself and his contemporary believers in the group anticipating the coming of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).
† Paul didn't say that Christians living thousands of years later would be the intended generation. He spoke from the perspective of believers living during the first-century covenant transition (Hebrews 8:13).
† This doesn't prove Paul knew he would personally survive until the coming. It shows that the event belonged to the expectation of his own generation (Philippians 4:5; James 5:8-9).
† The phrase "are left" identifies believers who remained alive, in contrast to those who had already died. It doesn't identify people surviving a future seven-year tribulation (Matthew 24:34).
† Paul was assuring the living that they wouldn't have an advantage over those who had died in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

What Does Caught Up Mean?

1 Thessalonians 4:16-17
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.
† The Greek word translated "caught up" is harpazo, meaning to seize, take, or snatch away. The word itself doesn't determine

whether an event is physical or spiritual (Acts 8:39; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4).
† Paul used harpazo when describing someone caught up into paradise, yet he explicitly said he didn't know whether that experience occurred in the body or apart from the body (2 Corinthians 12:2-4).
† Therefore, the Greek word alone can't establish that Paul predicted the physical removal of millions of Christians into the atmosphere.
† The passage also doesn't describe believers disappearing for seven years, returning to earth afterward, or escaping a future Antichrist. Those details must be imported from other interpretations (Matthew 24:34; 1 John 2:18).
† Paul's emphasis was that deceased and living believers would share the same completed relationship with Christ. Neither group would be excluded from the promised resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).
† The words "and so shall we ever be with the Lord" identify the permanent result. The passage centers on union with Christ, not a temporary journey through the atmosphere (John 14:3; Romans 8:38-39).

What Do The Clouds Represent?

Daniel 7:13-14
I kept looking in the night visions, And behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a son of man was coming, And He came up to the Ancient of Days And was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, Honor, and a kingdom, So that all the peoples, nations, and populations of all languages Might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion Which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one Which will not be destroyed.
† Daniel's vision provides an essential background for understanding the language of Christ's coming in the clouds (Matthew 26:64).
† Notice the direction of movement. The Son of Man comes to

the Ancient of Days to receive dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom. Daniel wasn't describing Jesus descending physically to earth (Psalm 110:1).
† Clouds frequently symbolize divine presence, authority, and judgment in biblical prophecy (Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1).
† When Jesus applied Daniel's prophecy to Himself before the high priest, He connected His vindication and heavenly authority with events that His opponents would witness (Matthew 26:64).
† Therefore, the cloud language in Paul's description must be considered within the Bible's established prophetic imagery. It doesn't automatically require a physical appearance in the atmosphere (Matthew 24:30).

Did God Literally Ride A Cloud Into Egypt?

Isaiah 19:1
The pronouncement concerning Egypt: Behold, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.
† Isaiah described God coming upon a cloud in judgment against Egypt. The prophecy concerned historical judgment, not God's visible bodily descent from heaven (Isaiah 19:2-4).
† The language communicated divine authority and intervention in human history. God didn't need to become physically visible in the atmosphere to fulfill His prophetic announcement (Psalm 18:9-12).
† This provides a biblical precedent for understanding the coming of Christ in judgment upon Jerusalem in the first century (Matthew 23:36-38).
† The clouds in Paul's passage shouldn't be isolated from this prophetic background and turned into a modern transportation system (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:30).

What Does Meeting The Lord In The Air Mean?

Matthew 25:6
But at midnight there finally was a shout: 'Behold, the groom! Come out to meet him.'
† The Greek word translated "meet" is apantesis, the same word Paul used when describing believers meeting the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
† In the ancient world, this word could describe people going out to welcome an arriving dignitary. It also appears when believers went out to meet Paul as he approached Rome (Acts 28:15).
† However, the word doesn't automatically prove either a physical return to earth or a journey into heaven. Its meaning must be determined by the context.
† Paul's description emphasizes the gathering of God's people to Christ and their permanent fellowship with Him (2 Thessalonians 2:1; John 14:3).
† The air was also understood in the ancient world as the realm associated with spiritual powers. Paul elsewhere described the ruler of the authority of the air, making spiritual imagery relevant to the discussion (Ephesians 2:2).
† This connection doesn't prove that the word "air" must be symbolic, but it challenges the assumption that Paul was necessarily giving a literal description of atmospheric travel.
† From the fulfilled perspective, meeting Christ in the air describes the completion of the promised gathering and union with the victorious Lord, rather than Christians being physically transported above the earth (Hebrews 12:22-24; John 14:3).

What Did Jesus Say About The Timing Of His Coming?

Matthew 24:30-34
And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet blast, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other. Now learn the

parable from the fig tree: as soon as its branch has become tender and sprouts its leaves, you know that summer is near; so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.
† Jesus connected His coming in the clouds, the sounding of the trumpet, and the gathering of His elect with the generation listening to Him (Matthew 23:36).
† These are the same major prophetic elements Paul used when describing the coming of the Lord to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
† Jesus didn't place these events thousands of years into the future. He declared that His generation wouldn't pass away before all these things were accomplished (Luke 21:20-22, 32).
† The destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 publicly demonstrated the end of the Old Covenant order and the vindication of Christ's authority (Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 26:64).
† The fulfilled perspective understands Paul's resurrection and gathering language within that same first-century covenant fulfillment, not as a separate coming still awaiting fulfillment (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

What Did Paul Mean By The Last Trumpet?

1 Corinthians 15:51-53
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. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.
† Paul again distinguished between believers who had died and those who would remain alive at the resurrection's fulfillment (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).
† The last trumpet corresponds to the gathering announced by Jesus and the trumpet associated with the coming of the Lord (Matthew 24:31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16).

† Trumpets in Scripture frequently announced God's intervention, covenant assemblies, and divine judgment (Numbers 10:2-10; Joel 2:1).
† Paul wasn't describing an event in which Christians would abandon their bodies while the world continued through a secret tribulation. He was describing the victory of Christ over death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).
† From the corporate resurrection perspective, the change concerns the completed transition from the Adamic order of death into the incorruptible life established through Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22, 45-49).
† The promise reached its covenant fulfillment when the Old Covenant order passed away, and Christ's people entered the completed New Covenant reality (Hebrews 8:13; Revelation 21:1-4).

Was The Coming Of The Lord Near In Paul's Day?

1 Thessalonians 5:1-4
Now as to the periods and times, brothers and sisters, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord is coming just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then sudden destruction will come upon them like labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers and sisters, are not in darkness, so that the day would overtake you like a thief;
† Paul didn't introduce a completely different coming when he continued into chapter five. He explained the timing and suddenness of the day associated with the preceding resurrection promise (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18).
† The chapter division was added centuries later. Paul's original letter presented a continuous discussion.
† He distinguished between those facing sudden judgment and believers who had been instructed to remain spiritually alert (1 Thessalonians 5:5-9).
† Jesus likewise warned His first-century disciples to remain

watchful because judgment would arrive unexpectedly upon those who rejected His warnings (Matthew 24:42-44; Luke 21:34-36).
† This connection supports understanding Paul's teaching within the approaching first-century judgment rather than separating it into an entirely different prophetic program (James 5:8-9).

Had Believers Already Come To Heavenly Jerusalem?

Hebrews 12:22-24
But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.
† Notice that the writer didn't say believers must wait thousands of years to approach heavenly Jerusalem. He declared that they had already come to Mount Zion and the heavenly city (Galatians 4:26).
† Their participation in the heavenly assembly was a covenant reality established through Jesus Christ, not the result of physically traveling into the sky (Ephesians 2:6, 18-22).
† The promised gathering and resurrection brought God's people into the completed New Covenant order, where access to the Father was established through Christ (Hebrews 10:19-22).
† We don't need a future rapture to enter God's kingdom. Believers already belong to the kingdom of His beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

What About The Promise Of Being With Christ?

John 14:2-3
In My Father's house are many rooms; if that were not so, I

would have told you, because I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you also will be.
† Jesus promised His disciples that He would receive them to Himself. The emphasis was fellowship with Christ, not the physical location of believers in the atmosphere (John 14:18-23).
† Jesus also explained that the Father and Son would make Their dwelling with those who loved Him and kept His word (John 14:23).
† This promise agrees with the New Covenant reality of God dwelling among His people (2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3).
† Being forever with the Lord is the enduring blessing Paul announced. It isn't dependent upon a future worldwide disappearance of Christians (Romans 8:38-39).

Historical References
† Flavius Josephus, The Jewish War, Books 5-7, recorded the Roman siege, the destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the temple, and the terrible suffering associated with the war of AD 66-70.
† Tacitus, Histories, Book 5, described the Jewish revolt and the Roman campaign against Jerusalem, providing independent Roman historical testimony concerning the conflict.
† Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7, preserved early Christian traditions concerning believers leaving Jerusalem and interpreted the city's destruction as judgment connected with the rejection of Christ.
† These historical writers document the first-century setting of Jerusalem's destruction. They don't independently establish that a spiritual resurrection or gathering occurred in AD 70. That conclusion comes from the fulfilled interpretation of Scripture.
† No historical record describes millions of first-century Christians physically disappearing into the sky. The fulfilled perspective doesn't require such an event because it

understands Paul's description as covenantal and prophetic (Matthew 24:30-34; Hebrews 12:22-24).

How It Applies To Us Today

† We don't need to wait for a secret rapture to experience the blessings of the New Covenant. Christ has already established His kingdom, and believers belong to Him now (Colossians 1:13).

† We don't need to fear that we'll be left behind during a future seven-year tribulation. Jesus' warnings about the approaching destruction of Jerusalem belonged to His first-century generation (Luke 21:20-22).

† We don't need to look toward the clouds for the fulfillment of promises that Christ has already accomplished. We're called to live by faith in the reigning Lord (2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 12:28).

† Physical death doesn't separate believers from Christ. Those who belong to Him have the assurance of continuing fellowship with Him (Romans 8:38-39; Philippians 1:23).

† The resurrection victory means death doesn't have the final word. Our hope rests in Christ's completed work, not in an unfinished prophetic timetable (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

† The kingdom isn't waiting to begin. The heavenly Jerusalem isn't waiting to open. Christ reigns, His people belong to Him, and His New Covenant remains forever (Hebrews 12:22-28; Revelation 22:14, 17).

Q & A Appendix

Q: Does the word "rapture" appear in the Bible?
A: The English word doesn't appear in most Bible translations. It comes through the Latin translation of the Greek word harpazo, meaning to seize or catch up. The word is biblical, but the modern doctrine of a secret, future removal of Christians isn't established by the word itself (1 Thessalonians 4:17; Acts 8:39).

Q: Was Paul predicting that Christians would physically fly into the sky?
A: The passage uses language of clouds, a trumpet, resurrection, and meeting the Lord. The fulfilled perspective interprets these through biblical prophetic imagery and the first-century expectation of Christ's coming (Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 24:30-34).

Q: Why did Paul say "we who are alive"?
A: Paul was addressing the living believers of his own time and contrasting them with believers who had died. His language reflects the first-century expectation of the Lord's coming, although it doesn't prove Paul knew he would personally survive until that event (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; James 5:8-9).

Q: What happened to the dead in Christ?
A: From the corporate resurrection perspective, they participated in the promised resurrection victory when the covenant order of death was brought to its appointed end through Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22-26, 54-57; Revelation 20:12-14).

Q: What happened to believers who remained alive?
A: They participated in the completed New Covenant reality without needing to experience physical death first. Their relationship with Christ was secured through the fulfillment of His promises (1 Corinthians 15:51-53; Hebrews 12:22-24).

Q: Does meeting the Lord in the air mean Jesus returned physically to earth?
A: The Greek word for meeting doesn't determine the physical direction of travel. The fulfilled interpretation understands the meeting as the completed gathering of believers to Christ, consistent with the prophetic language of His coming (Matthew 24:30-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1).

Q: Did the rapture happen in AD 70?
A: The fulfilled perspective teaches that the resurrection, gathering, and coming of Christ described by Paul reached their covenant fulfillment in the first century. It doesn't teach that Christians physically vanished into the atmosphere in AD 70 (Matthew 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

Q: Are Christians still waiting for Jesus to establish His kingdom?
A: No. Jesus received His kingdom, and believers have been transferred into His kingdom. We're citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem now (Daniel 7:13-14; Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:22-28).

Q: What happens when a Christian dies today?
A: A believer's physical death doesn't interrupt fellowship with Christ. Because the resurrection promise has been fulfilled, believers have the assurance of being with the Lord rather than waiting in an unfulfilled covenant order (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Q: What was Paul's main purpose in writing about being caught up?
A: Paul wanted grieving Christians to understand that their deceased brothers and sisters wouldn't miss the promises of Christ. Both the living and the dead belonged to the Lord, and their hope was secure in Him (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Romans 8:38-39).

† This is the fulfilled perspective we proclaim at Fulfilled Prophecies †
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Source Index
† 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Daniel 7:13-14; Isaiah 19:1; Matthew 25:6; Matthew 24:30-34; 1 Corinthians 15:51-53; 1

Thessalonians 5:1-4; Hebrews 12:22-24; John 14:2-3
† Flavius Josephus, The Jewish War, Books 5-7; Tacitus, Histories, Book 5; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapters 5-7

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