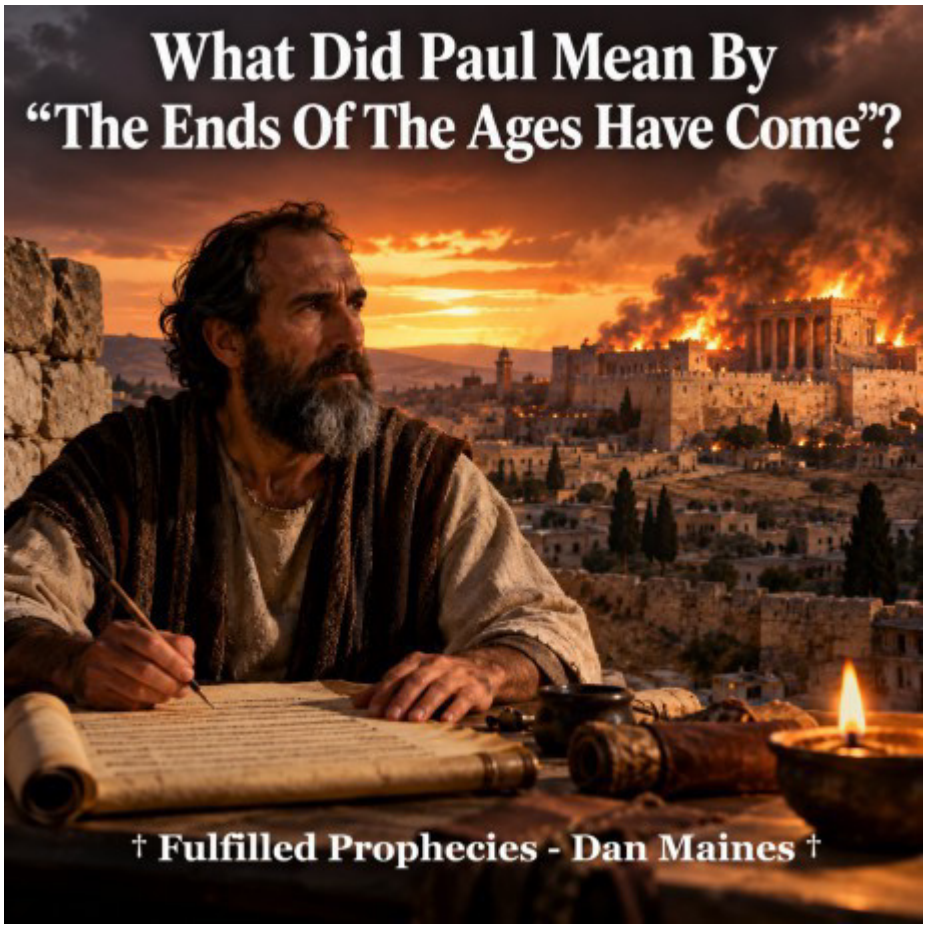
Fulfilled Prophecies

What Did Paul Mean By "The Ends Of The Ages Have Come"?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he made a remarkable statement about the time in which they were living. He declared that the ends of the ages had come upon them. He wasn't predicting something thousands of years into the future. He was describing the fulfillment of God's redemptive plan taking place during their own generation (1 Corinthians 10:11).

† Many Christians have been taught that the end of the age

means the destruction of the physical universe. However, Paul connected the ends of the ages to Israel's history, the Law of Moses, and the fulfillment of God's promises through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:1-11; Galatians 4:4-5).
† The first-century believers were living during a remarkable transition. The Old Covenant was becoming obsolete, the New Covenant had been established through Christ, and the judgment Jesus announced against Jerusalem was approaching (Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:1-3, 34).
† To understand Paul's statement, we must examine whom he addressed, why he used Israel's wilderness history, what was ending, and how the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 completed the transition from the Old Covenant age to the fully established New Covenant order (1 Corinthians 10:1-11; Hebrews 9:26; 12:26-28).

The Ends Of The Ages Had Come Upon Them

1 Corinthians 10:11
Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.
† Notice Paul's words carefully. He didn't say the ends of the ages would come upon believers living thousands of years later. He said they had come upon us, identifying himself and his first-century readers (1 Corinthians 10:11).
† Paul used the past tense to describe something that had already reached his generation. The culmination of the ages wasn't a distant possibility. It was a present reality for those living during the apostolic period (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 9:26).
† The Greek expression translated ends of the ages points to the culmination of preceding ages. Paul was identifying the generation upon whom God's long-established purposes were reaching their fulfillment (1 Corinthians 10:11; Galatians 4:4).
† This doesn't mean every event associated with that transition had already occurred when Paul wrote. The New Covenant had

been inaugurated through Christ, while the final judgment upon the Old Covenant order was still approaching (Hebrews 8:13; 10:37).
† That's why Paul's statement is so important. He located the culmination of the ages within the lifetime of the people receiving his letter, not within an unidentified generation thousands of years later (1 Corinthians 10:11; Matthew 24:34).

Why Paul Used Israel's Wilderness History

1 Corinthians 10:1-6
For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.
† Paul deliberately began with Israel's deliverance from Egypt. He reminded the Corinthians that their ancestors passed through the sea, followed Moses, and received God's provision in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).
† Yet belonging to the covenant people didn't guarantee that everyone would enter the promised inheritance. Many Israelites rebelled and died in the wilderness because of unbelief and disobedience (Numbers 14:22-23; 1 Corinthians 10:5).
† Paul applied those historical events directly to the first-century believers. Israel's wilderness experience became a warning against rejecting God's provision and turning away from Christ (1 Corinthians 10:6-11).
† The connection is significant. Israel experienced deliverance from Egypt before entering the promised land. Likewise, the first-century believers experienced redemption through Christ while the Old Covenant order was approaching its final removal (Hebrews 3:7-19; 8:13).

† The forty years between Christ's ministry and Jerusalem's destruction provide a meaningful parallel to Israel's forty years in the wilderness. Both periods involved testing, unbelief, and the consequences of rejecting God's appointed deliverance (Numbers 14:33-34; Matthew 23:34-36).
† Paul wasn't merely teaching a lesson about ancient Israel. He was warning believers living at the culmination of the ages not to repeat the unbelief of their ancestors (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11-12).

Christ Appeared At The Consummation Of The Ages

Hebrews 9:26
Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.
† Hebrews confirms Paul's teaching by declaring that Christ appeared at the consummation of the ages. The writer didn't place this consummation thousands of years beyond his own lifetime (Hebrews 9:26).
† The word now is especially important. Christ had already appeared, offered Himself as the final sacrifice, and accomplished what the repeated sacrifices under the Law couldn't accomplish (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:1-14).
† The consummation of the ages centered on Jesus Christ. His death, resurrection, and priestly ministry brought the fulfillment toward which the Old Covenant sacrifices had always pointed (Hebrews 9:11-15; 10:11-18).
† The end of the ages wasn't the destruction of God's physical creation. It concerned the fulfillment of the redemptive order established through the Law and the prophets (Hebrews 9:26; Matthew 5:17-18).
† Christ's sacrifice occurred around AD 30, and Jerusalem's destruction followed in AD 70. The sacrifice established the New Covenant, while the destruction of the temple marked the historical removal of the former covenant's earthly center (Luke

22:20; Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:1-2).
† These events belong to the same first-century fulfillment, but they shouldn't be confused. Christ accomplished redemption through His sacrifice, not through the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (Hebrews 9:12, 26; 10:14).

The Old Covenant Was Ready To Disappear

Hebrews 8:13
When He said, A new covenant, He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.
† The writer of Hebrews identified exactly what was becoming obsolete. It was the first covenant, the covenant established with Israel through Moses (Hebrews 8:6-13).
† Notice the distinction. The first covenant had already been made obsolete, yet its historical order was still approaching disappearance when Hebrews was written (Hebrews 8:13).
† This explains why the first-century believers lived during a period of covenant transition. The New Covenant was established through Christ, but the temple and its priestly system continued operating until Jerusalem's destruction (Hebrews 9:8-10; 10:11).
† The temple's destruction in AD 70 brought the Old Covenant's earthly sacrificial system to an irreversible end. The priesthood, sacrifices, and temple-centered worship could no longer continue as before (Matthew 24:1-2; Hebrews 10:1-18).
† God wasn't preparing to destroy the planet. He was bringing the former covenant order to its appointed conclusion because Christ had fulfilled its purpose (Hebrews 8:13; 10:9).
† That's why the end of the age must be understood within the covenant context established by Scripture rather than automatically interpreted as the end of physical creation (Hebrews 8:13; Matthew 24:3).

God Spoke Through His Son In The Last Days

Hebrews 1:1-2
God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
† Hebrews identifies the last days as the period in which God spoke through His Son. The writer included himself and his readers within those days (Hebrews 1:1-2).
† The contrast is between God's earlier revelation through the prophets and His final revelation through Jesus Christ. The promised Messiah had arrived, and the fulfillment of Israel's covenant expectations was underway (Hebrews 1:1-2; Luke 24:44).
† These last days weren't introduced as a period beginning thousands of years after the apostles. They were already present when Christ appeared and when the New Testament writers addressed their churches (Hebrews 1:2; Acts 2:16-17).
† Peter likewise identified the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the last-days prophecy spoken through Joel. That fulfillment began in the first century, not in our modern generation (Acts 2:16-21).
† The last days were the concluding days of the Old Covenant age, during which God revealed His Son and brought Israel's prophetic promises to their fulfillment (Hebrews 1:1-2; 8:13).
† We live after that covenant transition, under the completed New Covenant established through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 9:15; 12:22-28).

The Fullness Of Time Had Already Arrived

Galatians 4:4-5
But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.
† Paul declared that the fullness of time had arrived when God sent His Son. Christ didn't come before God's appointed time or

thousands of years before the fulfillment could begin (Galatians 4:4).
† Jesus was born under the Law because He came to fulfill the covenant obligations and promises that Israel couldn't complete through its own righteousness (Galatians 4:4-5; Matthew 5:17).
† His mission was to redeem those under the Law and bring them into the promised inheritance through faith. The movement was from covenant bondage to freedom in Christ (Galatians 4:5-7, 21-31).
† Paul later contrasted earthly Jerusalem, associated with bondage, with Jerusalem above, associated with freedom and the promise (Galatians 4:24-26).
† This distinction helps explain the end of the ages. The former covenant order was giving way to the promised inheritance established through Christ, not to another temporary earthly religious system (Galatians 4:26-31; Hebrews 12:22-24).
† God's people no longer depend upon the temple in earthly Jerusalem for access to Him. Through Christ, believers have access to the Father in one Spirit (Ephesians 2:18-22).

Jesus Identified The End Of The Age With His Generation

Matthew 24:3, 34
As He was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?
Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.
† The disciples asked Jesus about the end of the age immediately after He announced the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (Matthew 24:1-3).
† Their question must be understood in its historical setting. Jesus had just declared that the magnificent temple buildings would be torn down (Matthew 24:1-2).
† Jesus answered by describing events involving Judea, Jerusalem, persecution, false prophets, and the coming

judgment upon that generation (Matthew 24:4-28; Luke 21:20-24).
† He then established the time boundary by declaring that this generation wouldn't pass away until all these things occurred (Matthew 24:34).
† The generation hearing Jesus' warning was the generation that witnessed Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70. The temple fell within approximately forty years of His prophecy (Matthew 24:1-3, 34).
† The end of the age therefore concerned the conclusion of the Old Covenant order centered in Jerusalem, not the disappearance of the earth or the termination of human history (Matthew 24:3, 34; Hebrews 8:13).
† Paul's declaration that the ends of the ages had come upon his readers fits this same first-century setting. Both Jesus and Paul located the fulfillment within the generation then living (1 Corinthians 10:11; Matthew 24:34).

The End Was Near When Peter Wrote

1 Peter 4:7
The end of all things is near; therefore, be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.
† Peter told his first-century readers that the end was near. His instruction was based upon the nearness of the approaching judgment (1 Peter 4:7).
† Peter wasn't telling believers that the physical universe would disappear before they finished praying. He was warning them about the approaching culmination of the covenant age (1 Peter 4:7, 17).
† Earlier in the same chapter, Peter spoke about judgment being ready and then declared that the time had come for judgment to begin with the household of God (1 Peter 4:5, 17).
† His language agrees with Paul's statement that the ends of the ages had come upon the first-century believers (1 Corinthians 10:11; 1 Peter 4:7).
† Both apostles described the urgency of their own time. Their

warnings weren't meaningless statements about events that wouldn't occur for thousands of years (1 Corinthians 10:11; 1 Peter 4:7).
† The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 provides the historical fulfillment of the approaching covenant judgment announced by Jesus and anticipated by His apostles (Matthew 23:36-38; 24:34).

The Old Was Passing Away While The New Remained

2 Corinthians 3:11
For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.
† Paul contrasted the glory of the former covenant with the greater glory of the New Covenant. One was passing away, while the other would remain (2 Corinthians 3:7-11).
† The former ministry was associated with the commandments engraved on stones. Paul explicitly connected it with Moses and the veil associated with the Old Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:7, 13-15).
† The New Covenant brought the ministry of the Spirit and righteousness through Jesus Christ. Its glory wasn't temporary because it rested upon the completed work of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:8-11, 17-18).
† Paul's language confirms that the covenant transition was already underway during his lifetime. The former order was losing its standing as the permanent New Covenant order was being established (2 Corinthians 3:11; Hebrews 8:13).
† The end of the ages didn't mean the end of God's kingdom. It meant the removal of the temporary covenant administration so that the enduring reality established through Christ would remain (Hebrews 12:26-28).
† That's why believers today aren't waiting for another covenant to replace the New Covenant. Christ is the mediator of the better covenant, established upon better promises (Hebrews 8:6; 9:15).

Historical References

† Flavius Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, recorded the Jewish revolt against Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. His account provides important historical evidence for the catastrophe Jesus had announced (Josephus, The Jewish War, Books 5-6; Matthew 24:1-2).
† Josephus described the siege, famine, internal conflict, and burning of the temple. These events demonstrate the devastating conclusion of Jerusalem's first-century religious and political order (Josephus, The Jewish War, Book 6; Luke 21:20-24).
† Tacitus, the Roman historian, also described the Jewish revolt and the Roman campaign against Jerusalem. His account provides an additional non-Christian historical witness to the events surrounding AD 70 (Tacitus, Histories, Book 5).
† Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, preserved the tradition that Christians in Jerusalem received a warning and relocated to Pella before the city's destruction. His account reflects an early Christian understanding that Jesus' warnings concerned the approaching judgment upon Jerusalem (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.5; Matthew 24:15-16).
† These historical writers help establish the reality of Jerusalem's destruction. The covenant meaning of those events, however, must be established through Scripture, particularly Jesus' prophecy and the apostles' teaching (Matthew 24:34; Hebrews 8:13; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

How It Applies To Us Today

† Paul's statement reminds us that we must respect the historical setting of Scripture. When an apostle declared that the ends of the ages had come upon his generation, we shouldn't move that fulfillment thousands of years into the future without biblical justification (1 Corinthians 10:11).
† We don't live under the Old Covenant waiting for its final

removal. Jesus established the New Covenant through His sacrifice, and the former covenant order has passed away (Hebrews 8:13; 10:9-18).
† We don't need an earthly temple, an animal sacrifice, or a Levitical priesthood to approach God. Jesus Christ is our great High Priest, and through Him we have confidence to enter God's presence (Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-22).
† We aren't waiting for the kingdom to arrive. Believers have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and Christ reigns as King (Hebrews 12:28; Colossians 1:13).
† The New Jerusalem isn't merely a future earthly construction project. Believers have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, through Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:22-24).
† The warnings from Israel's wilderness experience still teach us the importance of faithfulness, humility, and obedience. Historical fulfillment doesn't remove the spiritual lessons God preserved for His people (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11-12).
† Our hope rests in what Christ has accomplished, not in another destruction of Jerusalem or another end of the covenant age (Hebrews 9:12; 10:14).
† The ends of the ages came upon the first-century believers because God's redemptive promises were reaching their appointed fulfillment. We now enjoy the blessings of the everlasting covenant established through Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 13:20-21).

Q & A Appendix

Q: What did Paul mean when he said the ends of the ages had come?
A: He was identifying his own generation as the one experiencing the culmination of God's redemptive plan through Christ and the approaching conclusion of the Old Covenant age (1 Corinthians 10:11; Hebrews 9:26).

Q: Was Paul predicting the destruction of the physical universe?

A: No. His discussion concerned Israel's covenant history and the lessons that applied to believers living during the fulfillment of God's promises (1 Corinthians 10:1-11; Hebrews 8:13).

Q: Why did Paul mention Israel's wilderness experience?
A: He used Israel's unbelief and judgment as examples for the first-century believers who were living during the culmination of the ages (1 Corinthians 10:5-11).

Q: Had the New Covenant already begun when Paul wrote?
A: Yes. Christ established the New Covenant through His sacrifice, although the Old Covenant's earthly temple system continued until Jerusalem's destruction (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:13; 9:15).

Q: Why is AD 70 important to understanding this passage?
A: Jerusalem's destruction brought the temple-centered Old Covenant order to its historical conclusion within the generation Jesus identified (Matthew 24:1-3, 34; Hebrews 8:13).

Q: Did the end of the ages mean the end of God's kingdom?
A: No. The temporary covenant order passed away, but believers received an unshakable kingdom that remains (Hebrews 12:26-28; 2 Corinthians 3:11).

Q: Are Christians today still living in the last days of the Old Covenant?
A: No. The last days identified by the apostles belonged to the first-century covenant transition. We live under the established New Covenant through Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2; 8:13).

Q: What is the most important lesson of 1 Corinthians 10:11?
A: We must understand biblical prophecy according to its original audience, historical setting, and fulfillment in Jesus Christ rather than automatically transferring first-century statements into our future (1 Corinthians 10:11; Matthew 24:34).

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

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Source Index

† 1 Corinthians 10:11; 1 Corinthians 10:1-6; Hebrews 9:26; Hebrews 8:13; Hebrews 1:1-2; Galatians 4:4-5; Matthew 24:3, 34; 1 Peter 4:7; 2 Corinthians 3:11.

† Flavius Josephus, The Jewish War, Books 5-6; Tacitus, Histories, Book 5; Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5.

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