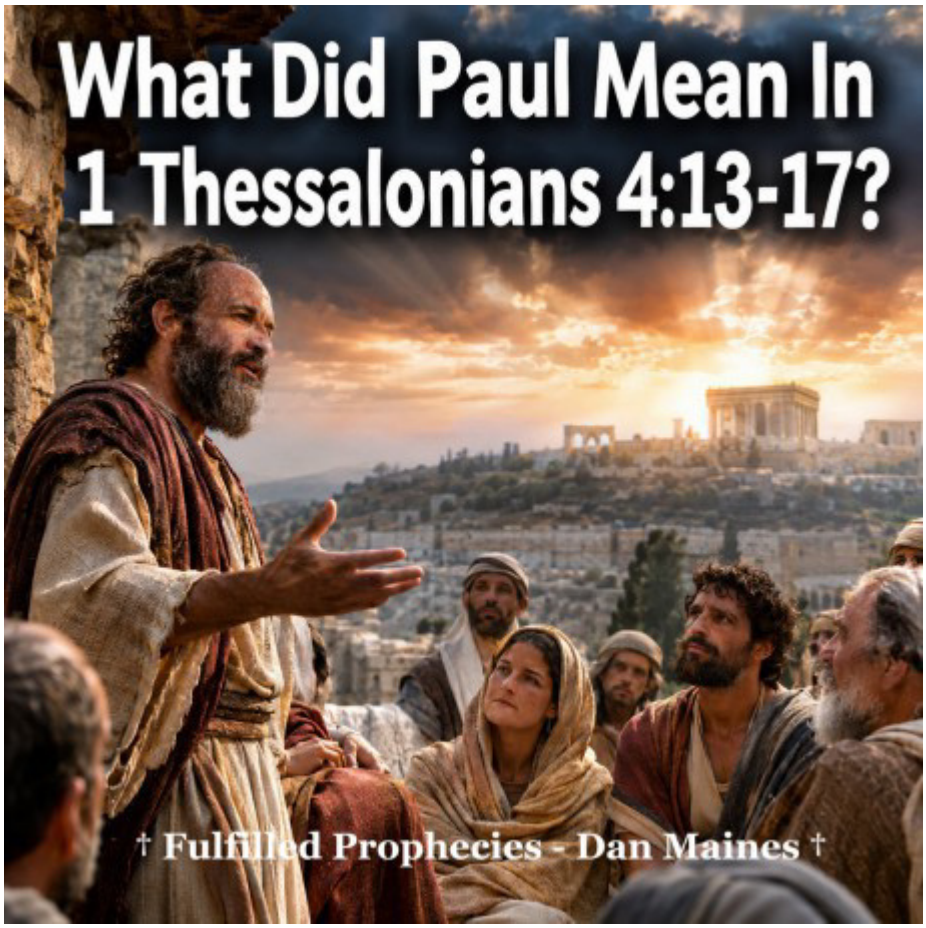
Fulfilled Prophecies

What Did Paul Mean In 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17?



By Dan Maines

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Introduction

† First Thessalonians 4:13-17 is one of the most misunderstood passages in the New Testament. Futurists often use these verses to teach that Jesus will someday return physically to earth, raise dead bodies from their graves, and remove living Christians from the planet in an event called the rapture. But is that what Paul was teaching?

† Paul wasn't writing to Christians living thousands of years in his future. He was writing to the first-century Thessalonian

believers who were grieving because some of their fellow Christians had died before the promised coming of Christ. They wanted to know what would happen to those who had fallen asleep in Jesus.
† Paul's answer wasn't about escaping the earth. It was about resurrection, victory over death, and being forever with the Lord. He assured them that those who had died wouldn't be forgotten or excluded when Christ fulfilled His promises.
† The key to understanding this passage is recognizing its original audience, the timing of Christ's coming, and the resurrection promised in Daniel 12. When we compare Scripture with Scripture, we discover that Paul was describing the completion of redemption at the end of the Old Covenant age in AD 70, not an event still awaiting fulfillment.
† We must also understand that Paul used familiar prophetic language. Clouds represented divine presence and judgment, trumpets announced significant covenant events, and meeting the Lord described the gathering of His people into His presence. These expressions must be understood through the Old Testament prophets rather than modern expectations of a physical evacuation.

1 Thessalonians 4:13
But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope.
† Paul began by addressing the Thessalonians' grief over believers who had died. His concern wasn't that they might miss a future evacuation from earth. He wanted them to understand that death wouldn't prevent their loved ones from sharing in Christ's promised resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:22-23).
† The expression those who are asleep refers to believers who had physically died. Sleep was a familiar biblical description of death, but Paul's concern was their promised resurrection and continued relationship with Christ (John 11:11-14).
† Notice that Paul didn't tell them to stop grieving. He told them not to grieve like those who had no hope. Their hope rested in

Jesus Christ, who had conquered death and promised life to those who belonged to Him (John 11:25-26).
† This establishes the subject of the entire passage. Paul was answering a question about deceased believers and their participation in the resurrection, not introducing a secret rapture doctrine (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

1 Thessalonians 4:14
For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus.
† Paul grounded their hope in the historical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus had risen, those who belonged to Him could trust that death wouldn't separate them permanently from His presence (Romans 8:38-39).
† Notice Paul's statement that God would bring with Him those who had fallen asleep in Jesus. The deceased believers weren't excluded from the promised gathering. They would participate in Christ's victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:22-23).
† Paul's language points toward the fulfillment of the resurrection promise. The faithful who had died under the former covenant were awaiting the completion of redemption, when access to God's presence would be fully established (Hebrews 9:8; Hebrews 11:39-40).
† The fulfilled perspective recognizes that Christ's resurrection guaranteed the promised resurrection of His people. The completion of that promise belonged to the first-century transition from the Old Covenant age into the fully established New Covenant order (Daniel 12:1-2).

1 Thessalonians 4:15
For this we say 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.
† Paul's words we who are alive and remain are important. He included himself and his contemporary believers among those anticipating the coming of the Lord. He wasn't describing a generation living thousands of years later (1 Corinthians 15:51).

† Paul assured the living believers that they wouldn't precede those who had died. The resurrection promise included both groups, and neither would be forgotten when Christ completed His promised work (1 Corinthians 15:52).
† Jesus had already established the timeframe for His coming. He declared that some standing before Him would live to see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom, and He placed the fulfillment of His prophetic discourse within that generation (Matthew 16:27-28; Matthew 24:34).
† The coming of the Lord, or Parousia, refers to Christ's promised royal presence and judgment. In the fulfilled perspective, this was accomplished in AD 70 when Jerusalem and the Old Covenant temple system were judged (Matthew 24:30; Luke 21:20-22).
† Paul's expectation must be understood alongside the other New Testament time statements. The apostles consistently described the fulfillment as approaching in their own generation, not thousands of years away (Romans 13:11-12; James 5:8-9).

1 Thessalonians 4:16
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.
† Paul described Christ's coming using prophetic language associated with divine intervention, judgment, and the gathering of God's people. The Lord descending from heaven doesn't require a physical journey through the atmosphere. Scripture frequently describes God coming down when He acts in judgment (Isaiah 19:1; Micah 1:3-4).
† The shout and voice of the archangel communicate divine authority and the certainty of God's command. This wasn't an ordinary earthly announcement. Paul was describing the decisive fulfillment of God's resurrection promise (Daniel 12:1-2).
† The trumpet of God connects directly with the last trumpet in Paul's resurrection teaching. The trumpet announced the completion of the promised transformation and the victory over

death (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).
† The dead in Christ rising first addresses the Thessalonians' original concern. Those who had died wouldn't be left behind. Their resurrection was part of the promised completion of redemption (Hebrews 11:39-40).
† Daniel 12 identifies the resurrection with the time of unparalleled distress and the shattering of the power of the holy people. That places the resurrection within the judgment associated with the end of Israel's Old Covenant order, not the end of the physical universe (Daniel 12:1-2, 7).
† Jesus likewise connected the great trumpet and gathering of the elect with His coming in judgment, and He declared that those events would occur within that generation (Matthew 24:30-31, 34).

1 Thessalonians 4:17
Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord.
† This verse is the foundation of the modern rapture doctrine, but Paul never said believers would disappear from the earth or that Jesus would physically transport Christians into the sky. Those ideas are imposed upon the passage rather than established by its stated purpose (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).
† The expression caught up describes being gathered into the Lord's presence. In the fulfilled perspective, it represents the completed union of the living and resurrected saints with Christ, not the physical removal of Christians from the planet (Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:22-23).
† Clouds frequently symbolize divine glory, authority, and judgment. God was described as coming on a cloud against Egypt, yet that prophecy didn't require Him to appear physically in the atmosphere (Isaiah 19:1).
† Meeting the Lord in the air expresses the triumph of Christ's people and their participation in His heavenly kingdom. The emphasis isn't the altitude of the meeting but the permanent relationship established with the Lord (Ephesians 2:5-6).

† Paul's concluding statement explains the entire purpose of the promise. They would always be with the Lord. The goal was permanent fellowship with Christ, not temporary removal from earth followed by another return (John 14:2-3).
† Believers living today already belong to Christ's established kingdom. When we physically die, we don't wait for another resurrection event in the distant future. We enter the Lord's presence because redemption has been completed (2 Corinthians 5:6-8; Philippians 1:23).

Daniel 12:1-2, 7
Now at that time Michael, the great prince who stands guard over the sons of your people, will arise. And there will be a time of distress such as never occurred since there was a nation until that time; and at that time your people, everyone who is found written in the book, will be rescued.
Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.
I heard the man dressed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, as he raised his right hand and his left toward heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time; and as soon as they finish shattering the power of the holy people, all these events will be completed.
† Daniel connects the resurrection with a particular time of distress involving his people. Jesus identified the corresponding great tribulation with the judgment approaching Jerusalem (Matthew 24:15-21).
† The resurrection wasn't separated from that historical judgment by thousands of years. Daniel connected its completion with the shattering of the power of the holy people, understood in the fulfilled perspective as the termination of Israel's Old Covenant standing (Luke 21:20-22).
† Paul didn't invent a different resurrection timetable. His teaching in Thessalonians must agree with the resurrection promised through Daniel (Acts 24:14-15).

Matthew 24:30-31, 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 and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.
Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.
† Jesus described His coming with clouds, angels, a trumpet, and the gathering of His elect. Paul used the same prophetic imagery in Thessalonians. The passages describe the same covenantal fulfillment (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).
† Jesus didn't leave the timing uncertain. He explicitly placed these events within the lifetime of His contemporary generation (Matthew 16:27-28).
† If Jesus placed His coming and gathering within that generation, we cannot move Paul's corresponding description thousands of years into our future without separating what Scripture connects (Luke 21:22).

1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 54-55
Behold, I tell 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.
But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory.
O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?
† Paul again included living believers in the anticipated transformation. His words we will not all sleep agree with his statement about those alive and remaining until the coming of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:15).

† Both passages connect the resurrection with the trumpet. They aren't describing two different resurrection events separated by thousands of years (Matthew 24:31).
† The victory over death is central. In the covenantal resurrection perspective, Christ removed the condemnation and separation associated with Adam and the Law, establishing complete access to God through the New Covenant (Romans 8:1-2; Hebrews 10:19-22).
† The promised transformation wasn't about abandoning the physical world. It concerned the completed victory of Christ and the everlasting life secured for His people (John 11:25-26).

Colossians 1:13
For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son,
† Paul explicitly stated that believers had already been transferred into Christ's kingdom. Their citizenship in that kingdom wasn't waiting for a future physical rapture (Philippians 3:20).
† The kingdom is spiritual and belongs to Christ's redeemed people. Entry into it doesn't require leaving the earth or physically traveling into heaven (John 18:36; Romans 14:17).
† The fulfillment of the resurrection promise completed the transition into the fully established New Covenant order, but believers were already participating in Christ's kingdom before AD 70 (Hebrews 12:22-28).

2 Corinthians 5:6, 8
Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord--we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.
† Paul taught that being absent from the body meant being at home with the Lord. He didn't describe believers waiting in graves for a future worldwide resurrection (Philippians 1:21-23).
† The completed resurrection promise means that believers today have immediate access to Christ's presence when

physical life ends (Revelation 14:13).
† We don't need another trumpet, another coming, or another covenantal resurrection. Christ has accomplished the redemption promised to His people (Hebrews 9:12; Hebrews 10:14).

Historical References
† Josephus, in The Jewish War, Books 5-6, described the terrible suffering, famine, destruction, and slaughter associated with Jerusalem's fall in AD 70. His historical account provides important background for understanding the first-century judgment described by Jesus (Luke 21:20-24).
† Josephus also described the destruction of the temple, the center of Israel's Old Covenant sacrificial worship. That historical event is significant to the fulfilled perspective because Hebrews described the former covenant as becoming obsolete and disappearing (Hebrews 8:13).
† Eusebius, in Ecclesiastical History, Book 3, Chapter 5, reported that Christians in Jerusalem were instructed to leave the city and settle in Pella before its destruction. His account supports the historical setting of Jesus' warning to flee Judea (Luke 21:20-21).
† Tacitus, in Histories, Book 5, recorded the Roman conflict involving Jerusalem and the Jewish people. His writings provide additional historical testimony concerning the first-century war (Matthew 24:15-21).
† These historians document the historical setting of Jerusalem's destruction. They don't independently establish that the resurrection occurred in AD 70. That theological conclusion comes from comparing the biblical resurrection promises with their stated timeframes (Daniel 12:1-7; Matthew 24:34).

How It Applies To Us Today
† We don't need to live in fear of a future rapture, a coming tribulation, or another destruction of the world. Jesus fulfilled His promises to His original audience, and His kingdom is established (Matthew 24:34; Colossians 1:13).

† When someone we love dies in Christ, we can grieve with hope. Physical death doesn't destroy our relationship with Him or prevent us from entering His presence (John 11:25-26; 2 Corinthians 5:8).
† We don't have to wait for Christ to establish His kingdom. We're already citizens of His heavenly kingdom and members of His New Covenant people (Hebrews 12:22-23; Philippians 3:20).
† The message of Thessalonians remains a source of comfort. The original resurrection promise has been fulfilled, and the continuing blessing is everlasting fellowship with the Lord (Revelation 14:13).
† Our responsibility isn't to search the skies for an event Jesus promised to His own generation. It's to live faithfully in the kingdom He established, proclaim His completed redemption, and share the hope of everlasting life (Ephesians 2:8-10; Colossians 3:1-4).

Q & A Appendix

Q: Was Paul teaching a future secret rapture in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17?
A: No. In the fulfilled perspective, Paul was comforting first-century believers concerning the resurrection of those who had died in Christ. The passage doesn't teach a secret removal of Christians from earth (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; Matthew 24:30-34).
Q: Who were those who had fallen asleep?
A: They were believers who had physically died before Christ's promised coming. Paul assured the Thessalonians that their deceased brothers and sisters wouldn't miss the resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13-16; John 11:11-14).
Q: What did Paul mean by we who are alive and remain?
A: He was addressing his own generation of believers who anticipated the promised coming of Christ. His language agrees with Jesus' first-century timeframe (Matthew 16:27-28; Matthew 24:34).

Q: Did Jesus physically descend through the atmosphere in AD 70?
A: The fulfilled perspective understands His descent as prophetic language describing His royal presence and judgment. Scripture uses similar language for divine judgments that didn't require a visible bodily descent (Isaiah 19:1; Micah 1:3-4).
Q: What did the trumpet represent?
A: It announced God's decisive action in completing the resurrection promise and gathering His people. Paul connected the trumpet with the resurrection and victory over death (1 Corinthians 15:51-54; Matthew 24:31).
Q: What does meeting the Lord in the air mean?
A: In the fulfilled perspective, it symbolizes the gathering of Christ's people into His victorious heavenly presence. The central promise is that believers would always be with the Lord (Ephesians 2:5-6; Hebrews 12:22-23).
Q: When did the resurrection promised in this passage occur?
A: The fulfilled perspective places its completion in AD 70, when Jerusalem's Old Covenant order was judged. Daniel connected the resurrection with the shattering of the power of the holy people (Daniel 12:1-2, 7; Luke 21:20-22).
Q: Were living Christians physically removed from earth in AD 70?
A: No. The fulfilled perspective understands their being caught up as covenantal participation in Christ's completed victory and established kingdom, not a physical disappearance (Colossians 1:13; Hebrews 12:22-28).
Q: What happens to believers when they die today?
A: They enter the presence of the Lord. They don't need to wait for another resurrection at the end of world history (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23; Revelation 14:13).
Q: What is the central message of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17?
A: Christ's people, whether deceased or living at His promised coming, wouldn't be separated from Him. The ultimate assurance was permanent fellowship with the Lord (John 11:25-

26; Romans 8:38-39).

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

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Source Index

† 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Daniel 12:1-2, 7; Matthew 24:30-31, 34; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, 54-55; Colossians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 5:6, 8.

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

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