

The Arrival of Christ
Matthew 24:29-31
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Matthew 24-25 addresses events related to the sign of His coming and the end of the age. Jesus listed several signs in Matthew 24:4-14 that will signal the initial stage of the end of the age before He returns, including people falsely claiming to be the Messiah, wars, famines, earthquakes, increasing unlawfulness, persecution upon all true disciples of Christ. The hatred of the world because of Christ's name will be assisted by these apostate religious traitors.

Nevertheless, those who truly believe in Jesus Christ will, by the grace of God, continue in the faith until the end of the age. In spite of such persecution, God's people will persevere throughout the time of the tribulation period. Not only will they endure, but they will abound in their service of the gospel of the kingdom. As a result of their faithfulness, the gospel will go forth to the whole world, leading to some people of every ethnic group belonging to Christ when He returns to establish His kingdom upon the earth. The events of the end of the age involve the final seven-year period prophesied by Daniel 9:24-27. According to Daniel 12:10-13, Matthew 24:15-28 will occur in the middle of this seven-year period, called the great tribulation in 24:21. Jesus did not address believers in the church era, for they will either have died or have been taken up by the Lord before this end of the age commences (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Jesus' prophecy of His return "*with power and great glory*" is found also in Mark 13:24-27 and Luke 21:25-28. These passages are very similar, however Matthew's account adds the detail that "*all the tribes of the earth will mourn*" and also the allusion from Zechariah 9:14 of "*a great trumpet.*"

The sudden arrival (24:29)

The seven-year tribulation period, "*the tribulation of those days,*" will end with the sudden return of Jesus Christ. This return is immediate and will be inaugurated when "*THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.*" This description of the appearance of the sky is an allusion to many Old Testament passages that speak of the sun and moon darkened (Isaiah 13:10; 23:23; Ezekiel 32:7; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:20; 8:9; Zephaniah 1:15) and the stars fallen and shaken (Isaiah 34:4; Haggai 2:6), as well as Revelation 6:12-14.

The Son of Man appears (24:30)

All the signs of Matthew 24:4-28 point to the return of Jesus in Matthew 29:30. The phrase *“then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky”* has been thought to be the Shekinah glory of God, such as with light or clouds, or by early church fathers as a fiery cross. However, it is more likely that the coming of Christ is the sign. The phrase in Greek may be understood as “the sign that is the Son of Man coming,” or “that which signifies the Son of Man coming.” This seems more likely since it would seem the return of Christ would be so overwhelming (*“all the tribes of the earth will mourn”*) that a different, unknown, sign would be unnecessary as He Himself is the final sign.

The result of when *“the Son of Man will appear in the sky”* is that *“all the tribes of the earth will mourn.”* This mourning has been thought to be in repentance and faith, or also to be in despair at the prospect of meeting the judge of all the earth. Since this mourning is expressed by *“all the tribes,”* it is more likely to be in judgment to the people of the world. Revelation 6:15-17 describes the desire of the people of the earth to flee from the Lord’s presence, *“Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the commanders and the rich and the strong and every slave and free man hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains; and they said to the mountains and to the rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?’”*

When the Lord returns in judgment upon the earth, it will be in the same way that He left at the ascension in Acts 1:9-11, *“He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.’”* When Christ returns, *“they will see the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY.”*

Jesus’ statement of Him *“coming on the clouds of the sky”* is a reference to 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, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.”*

This return will be seen by all, *“BEHOLD, HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him”* (Revelation 1:7). When all will see Him coming in the clouds, this is when *“THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL FALL from the sky.”* Therefore, these clouds are extraordinary, not like clouds in the sky when it is normally dark at night. The darkness of the natural light of the sun and moon and stars will be in stark contrast to the appearance of Jesus Christ. The clouds are what the Son of Man will be coming upon, not what He will be in the midst of.

Indeed, when Jesus responded to the high priest at his trial in Mark 14:62, He told him, *“you shall see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN.”* The clouds are not normal clouds but *“clouds of heaven.”* So between the sun, moon, stars and clouds, this is a very unique phenomenon.

This return will be *“with power and great glory.”* The power of the Lord will be seen as the Lord conquers His enemies and throws them alive into the lake of fire, *“And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone”* (Revelation 19:20-21).

The sending of the angels (24:31)

Matthew 24:31 describes an event that happens when Christ returns in the clouds of heaven to the earth. He begins this event by saying that He *“will send forth His angels.”* It is very common for angels to be involved with major events in biblical history, and with the life of Christ in particular. Angels announced the birth of Jesus, they warned Joseph to flee to Egypt, they ministered to Jesus in the wilderness, they strengthened Him in the garden of Gethsemane, they rolled away the stone from Jesus’ tomb and they were present at His ascension.

The Lord alludes to Isaiah 27:12-13, *“In that day the LORD will start His threshing from the flowing stream of the Euphrates to the brook of Egypt, and you will be gathered up one by one, O sons of Israel. It will come about also in that day that a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were perishing in the land of Assyria and who were scattered in the land of Egypt will come and worship the LORD in the holy mountain at Jerusalem.”* We can see from His chosen words that Israel is seen as being gathered in the land at the second coming of Christ.

When Jesus referred to Isaiah 27:12-13, He added that He would “*GATHER TOGETHER His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.*” The four winds point to the four directions on a compass (cf. Ezekiel 37:9; Daniel 8:8; 11:4), indicating that the elect would come from everywhere throughout the earth. Jesus spoke of this gathering previously in Matthew 8:11, “*I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 8:11). These elect are those who have been preserved on the earth, faithful to the Lord.

Along with the gathering of the elect, there will also be a gathering in judgment, accompanied by angels. Jesus earlier had taught “*The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 13:41-42). Paul wrote, “*Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus*” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). This judgment is spoken of in Matthew 16:27, “*For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS,*” and is described further in Matthew 25:31-46.

When the angels are sent forth to gather the elect from the ends of the earth, they will come “*with a great trumpet.*” Trumpets have been seen often in the Old Testament, such as sounding the start of a war, as with the siege of Jericho (Joshua 6:4-20) or Gideon against the Midianites (Joshua 7:8-22), the giving of the ten commandments (Exodus 19:6, 9; 20:18), temple ceremonies, royal announcements, etc.

Regarding future things, we see the use of a trumpet in announcing the rapture of the church in 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*” and in 1 Corinthians 15:52, “*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.*” Also, trumpets are seen announcing various events of the tribulation in the Book of Revelation (cf. 8:2, 6, 13; 9:14; 11:15).

This gathering of the elect will also include the church, which will return to reign with Christ (cf. 2 Timothy 2:12). “*When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory*” (Colossians 3:4).

Conclusion

Matthew 24:29-31 is Christ's prophesy of His return to earth to bring an end to the time of great tribulation and to establish His thousand-year reign in the kingdom of God (cf. Revelation 20:1-6). Yet this second coming of Christ must not be confused with the rapture of the church.

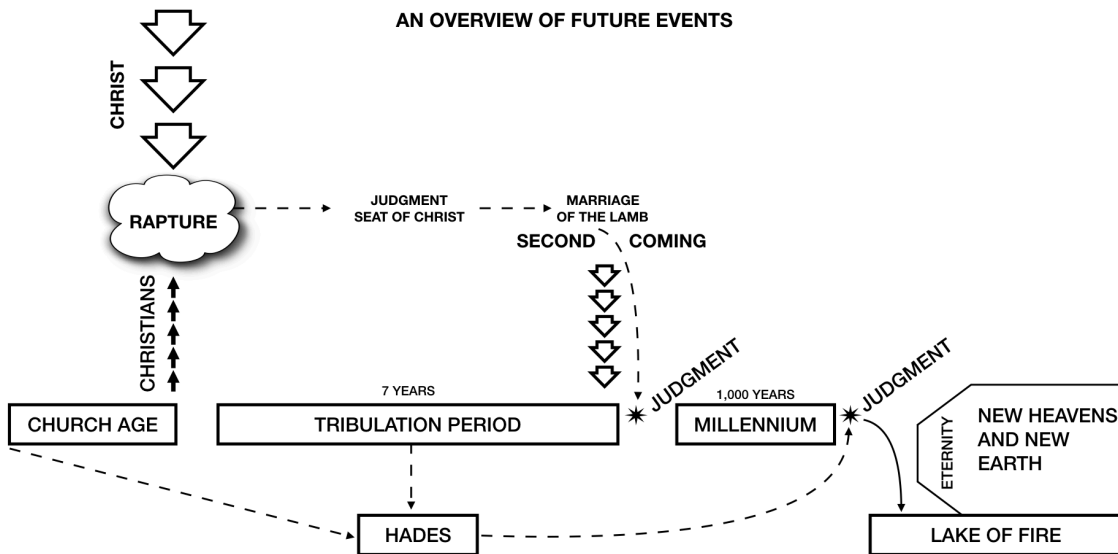
Non-premillennialists do not believe in a return of Christ to the earth to reign in the kingdom of God as prophesied in the Old Testament, so they view Matthew 24:29-31 as a spiritual return of Jesus to bring believers into heaven. Among Premillennialists, those who believe that Jesus will return after the tribulation period support this view by viewing the passages about the rapture of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) as referring to same even as second coming in Matthew 24:29-31.

The reason there is much confusion that causes people to equate the rapture of the church in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 with Matthew 24:29-31 is because of the similarities:

1. Both passages are about the return of Christ
"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
"and they will see the SON OF MAN COMING" (Matthew 24:30).
2. Both passages refer to clouds
"Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
"the SON OF MAN COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF THE SKY" (Matthew 24:30).
3. Both passages mention a trumpet
"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven...with the trumpet of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
"He will send forth His angels with A GREAT TRUMPET" (Matthew 24:31).
4. Both passages include angels
"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven...with the voice of the archangel" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
"And He will send forth His angels" (Matthew 24:31).
5. Both passages gather of God's people
"Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).
"and THEY WILL GATHER TOGETHER His elect" (Matthew 24:31).

However, there is one very notable difference between 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 and Matthew 24:29-31. With the rapture, the church rises to meet the Lord in the air, “the dead in Christ will rise first. 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” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). However, in the second coming of Christ, the Lord returns to the earth to judge, resulting in the unbelievers being taken away in the judgment, leaving only those who believe on earth, just as in the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37-41).

This is predicated upon the literal biblical understanding that the church is distinct from the nation of Israel. The typical overview of a pre-tribulational view of end times events looks like this:



However, we must recognize that while events on earth are sequential, the events outside of earth are not limited in time. Time, like everything else, is a creation of the infinite God. So what we, the believers in the church age, will be doing during the course of events of the tribulation is unclear, but we must not assume that we are bound by time like we are on earth.

Also, while the second coming of Christ immediately follows the great tribulation, there is no specific statement in the Scripture that requires the tribulation to immediately follow the rapture. We assume that it does, but there may be some other unknown era after the church age.

With regard to end times details, the fulfillment of prophecy from the Old Testament shows us that it is hard to understand. The church was a mystery (Ephesians 3:1-13), not revealed in the Old Testament. This set the course of the current understanding of end time events. As these events are fulfilled we will then learn more about God's plan, and we will surely grow in many aspects of our current knowledge of what we only see parts of today.

Our future is that we will be "*present with the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 5:8), whether through our death or Christ's return for the church. Our presence with the Lord will be a glorious day, and we may be ushered into the Lord's millennial kingdom quickly as we return with Him to reign with Him. Such truth ought to lead us toward living according to righteousness.

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus." (Titus 2:11-13).