

The Return of Jesus Christ – The Possible Order of Events – For Those who are “alive and remain” at his Appearing

As brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus, we believe that he will return from heaven to raise the dead to life and judge the world in righteousness.

Differing views

What is less certain and open to debate is just *exactly how* Christ will come. Some think that it will be in secret initially; that the only evidence of Christ's coming is that some people (believers) will have 'disappeared' – i.e. been taken to judgement. Only after the judgement will Christ make his *public* appearance to the world. Others say that Christ's coming will be public from the start. They say there will be no secretiveness in his coming but that every eye shall see him. All mankind will know he has arrived.

Having spoken to a number of brothers and sisters about this, it appears there are many shades of view that range between the *secret* return and the *public* return. There are also many who say that they are just not sure at all. This article looks at the evidence in the scriptures and tries to piece together the *order* of events surrounding the return of Jesus – especially from the viewpoint of those who are still alive and remain at his coming.

Beginning at Acts Chapter 1

So where do we begin? Perhaps the best place to start is from the point when Jesus departed from the earth – when he ascended into heaven recorded for us in Acts 1. Forty days after his resurrection Jesus stood with a few of his disciples on the Mount of Olives. As Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels told these disciples that Jesus would return one day: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come *in like manner* as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). So in what manner did Jesus go into heaven? He went up in a cloud – "While they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (verse 9).

We then ask some questions. Does the *manner* in which he went include *where* he ascended from? Does the *manner* in which he went include *who* saw him go?

Think of this from a practical point of view. Suppose a person left a particular place to go on a long journey riding a bicycle. Suppose there were a few people watching this person leave. Suppose someone (who knew for certain) said that this person would return in the same manner. What would we conclude? We would probably say that the person would return on a bicycle. We might well conclude that he would return to the same place. We probably would not conclude that the number of people who had seen the person leave would be the same. Why? Well, whether two people or two thousand people saw the person return on a bicycle, he would still have returned in the same manner.

From a straightforward reading of Acts 1 we could conclude that as Jesus physically ascended into the literal clouds, he will physically return in the literal clouds when he returns. This is the same *manner*. We might also conclude that he will return to the same place; i.e. the Mount of Olives.

Who and how many will see Jesus return is not conclusive from this passage alone. It may be few; it may be many.

So to summarise just from this passage:

1. Jesus will return in the clouds – conclusive
2. Jesus will return to the Mount of olives – very possibly
3. Large numbers of people will see him return – inconclusive

The Olivet Prophecy

We now turn to the Olivet prophecy and compare the records of Matthew 24, Mark 13 and Luke 21. Is what we have found so far in Acts 1 confirmed? Matthew 24:30 says: “And then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” This verse confirms Point 1 of our summary above. Jesus comes in the clouds. It neither confirms nor denies Point 2. There is no mention here as to where he returns to on earth. However, this verse does clarify Point 3. *All* the tribes of the earth see him coming.

Could it be though, that the clouds are symbolic here of people? After all, Hebrews 12:1 uses this image: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a *cloud of witnesses*”. Here a “cloud of witnesses” refers to the men and women of faith spoken of in the previous chapter. Could the clouds that Jesus returns in be symbolic of men of faith, i.e. the saints? – probably not. Why? Because the next verse (verse 31) in Matthew 24 says: “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other”. If this is chronological, we have *all* the tribes of the earth seeing Jesus return in the clouds followed by a trumpet blast, and *then* the elect (the chosen) are gathered by his angels.

This is confirmed in Mark 13:26,27: “And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. *And then* shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven”. Here we see the chronological order of events.

The word “elect” of course means ‘chosen’ and refers to believers. Revelation 17 uses the word “elect” and translates it as “chosen”: “for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and *chosen*, and faithful.”

The elect or chosen people refers to *all* true believers, dead or alive, at Christ’s coming.

We can now be certain of the following order of events:

1. Jesus returns in physical clouds
2. All mankind on earth witness this
3. A trumpet is blown by the angels
4. The elect are gathered

From this then it also appears that *we* (the elect), who are alive at the point Christ returns, along with the people of the world, will see Jesus coming in the clouds of heaven. We will then be gathered by the angels (at some point) to be with Jesus. So now with this information let us consider other key passages.

1 Thessalonians 4

Another key passage in relation to these events is 1 Thessalonians 4. Verse 16 says: “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first”. So again these events fit the order we are establishing. Jesus descends from heaven. At the same time there is a trump of God and the dead in Christ are raised first. No mention yet of what happens to the living. This comes in the next verse which says: “Then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”

So we can now say:

1. Jesus returns in physical clouds
2. All mankind on earth witness this
3. A trumpet is blown by the angels
4. The dead are raised }
5. The living are taken to Jesus } The elect are gathered

There does appear to be some delay between the dead being raised when the trumpet sounds and the living believers being gathered to be with Christ. Verse 15 indicates this as well: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive *and* remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not *prevent* them which are asleep.” The word “*prevent*” means ‘precede’. In other words Paul is making clear that whatever happens to the dead, happens *before* happening to the living; i.e., the dead are judged *first*, then the living. Why would the apostle make a distinction between the dead and the living if there is no time gap? Why does he say the living will *not* come before the dead? Are there other scriptures that indicate a time gap?

Matthew 25 – the parable of the 10 virgins

Matthew 25, which follows on from the Olivet prophecy is the one occasion where we read of the parable of the 10 virgins. The 10 virgins must be those who are part of the true religion. Why? – because as we know false religions are described as ‘harlots’. These are not harlots but virgins. They have kept themselves from the false doctrines of the other churches. However, though they are all virgins, half are wise and half are foolish. The wise have oil but the foolish have let their oil run out. Oil then, is the thing that distinguishes whether the virgin is wise or foolish. Oil is the key. Oil is symbolic of faith. Why? To start with, God’s word is symbolised by a lamp. “Thy word is a *lamp* unto my feet, and a *light* unto my path” (Psalm 119:105). We know that from an understanding of God’s word comes *faith*. “So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Oil is essential to and stands for the bright shining light coming out from our reading of the word of God.

So we have some people with faith and some without faith. But all grow weary of waiting for Christ to return. Then verse 6 says that suddenly: “At midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him”. Surely this could be the description of Christ appearing in the clouds of heaven with the angels – when the trumpet sounds and when the whole world, including ourselves will see the Lord Jesus Christ appear. The word “cry” means a ‘loud shout’. This is no quiet or secret return. It is midnight and a loud cry is made. The Bridegroom cometh!!! Go out to meet him.

This does sound as if Jesus is on his way and not actually present yet. In a sense this could be true if he is still in the sky above the earth. But he is approaching, of that there is no doubt. In fact the RSV puts it like this: “But at midnight there is a cry, Behold the Bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him.” Imagine the great loud cry if we did see our Lord appear. Surely we would say “Behold the bridegroom!”

Now what happens in the parable? The foolish want oil from the wise at this point. But the wise say that they cannot give of their oil and tell the foolish to go and buy elsewhere. Why cannot the foolish purchase oil at this point? If oil is symbolic of faith, then no wonder the foolish remain foolish. Faith has at this very point turned to sight. The Lord has appeared. It is now *impossible* from this point onwards to live by faith. Our position of being either wise or foolish, with oil or no oil, with faith or no faith, is set at our Lord’s appearing.

However when our Lord appears, verse 7 tells us: “Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps.” The word “trim” means ‘prepare. How we would all prepare!! Jesus has appeared in the clouds of heaven. The cry has been made. He is here. The

trumpet has been sounded. Would we continue to watch the soaps on TV, read novels, plan holidays, think of buying clothes, moving house, career, education, exams, etc., etc. The Bible Class would be full to bursting, the Sunday evening packed, we would want to meet with our brethren and sisters every day. We would *awake* from our slumber, wipe the sleep from our eyes, and wonder at the sight in heaven above us. We would prepare for the angels to gather us.

The dead would be judged during this time. Verse 10 then says that the Bridegroom finally arrives and is ready to gather those who are ready to the wedding. The foolish are not called in. “And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.” This is the point when we are finally gathered to be with him.

So the critical point of all this is to watch. Why? Because we don’t know the day or the hour when he will *appear* in heaven, for when he does *appear*, it will be too late to change the outcome. We have to have faith *now!* “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

The sign of the son of man

In Matthew 24:30 we read of the following event that has been quite difficult to explain: “And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.” We have already considered the latter part of this verse, i.e., the tribes of the earth mourning and seeing the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven. But what is the “sign of the Son of man” that causes the earth to mourn? The answer maybe more straight forward than we think.

Revelation 1:7 says: “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they *also* which pierced him: and all kindred’s of the earth shall wail because of him.” The word translated “wail” here is only used 8 times in the NT. It is exactly the same word translated “mourn” in Matthew 24:30. Revelation says that Jesus comes with the clouds and every eye shall see him. We now know these are literal clouds and we also will witness this. But when the earth sees him and the angels, men wail and mourn. They literally beat their chests in grief. So the sign of the Son of man *must* be the actual appearing of the Lord Jesus himself in heaven – nothing more, nothing less.

But why does Matthew describe the appearing of Jesus in heaven as a sign? Well, remember the sign of Jesus’ first coming. It was a star in heaven. Jesus himself, when he returns, comes as the Sun of righteousness. What is the greatest star we can see? It is the sun! He is the sign himself this time!

But why does his return make the people of the earth wail and mourn at the same time as we prepare to be gathered? There could be several reasons that will not be made clear until the day that Jesus does appear. One could be that at this time there is great tribulation such as never was since there was a nation (Daniel 12).

Another reason could be this. Imagine you are an atheist, or any of the billions of people who do not accept Jesus as the only saviour of the world. What grief it would cause you to know that the things on which you had based your life were now shown to be false. Imagine just for one moment if what we believed in was shown ultimately to be untrue, without hope of life – imagine we had got it wrong! Would we say, ‘Oh well, never mind’, or would our minds be full of grief?

One last thought on this. I do not know what Jesus might look like in the heavens accompanied by possibly tens of thousands of angels. The vision may look no more than a bright supernatural light with the naked eye. Imagine the panic and pandemonium at such a supernatural sight!

We often think of Jesus descending quickly to the earth. But why should he? For every eye to see him he only has to descend to earth over a 24-hour period and as the world turns everyone would see him. What if his descent took days or weeks? He will finally descend though and his feet *will* come to rest on the very Mount he left from – the Mount of Olives (see Zechariah 14).

So let us recap:

1. Jesus returns in physical clouds
2. This could be the sign of the Son of man
3. All mankind will witness this (including us)
4. All mankind will wail and mourn (we are full of joy)
5. A trumpet is blown by the angels
6. The dead are raised at the sound of the trumpet
7. We have a time of preparing to meet the Lord
8. During this time the resurrected dead are judged
9. The living are taken (by the angels) to Jesus to meet him in the clouds
10. Christ finally descends onto the Mount of Olives with all the elect and rescues natural Israel

All of this means of course that our Lord's appearing could be at anytime. We should be looking *up* for our redemption draws near. It also means (depending on how long we have before we are gathered) that we may live through some of the great tribulation. Matthew 24:22 tells us that “except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.”

A thief in the night

Another aspect of Christ's coming is that it is as a thief in the night: “For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). A thief comes unexpectedly and can come secretly and quietly. These are two very different aspects. A thief would always be unexpected but not always quiet and secret. Many are disturbed by thieves who make a noise as they enter. The breaking of glass as the window is broken etc.

As we have seen though, Christ's return is not quiet, secret and hidden. It could not be more different from this. It is with great brightness, noise, cry, and trumpet call. The entire world will see and hear. The thief-like return *must* therefore refer to his *unexpectedness*. He comes suddenly, when the world's attention is diverted. In fact when they say “peace and safety”. However Paul continues: “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.”

So to those who are *watching* and remain sober (verse 6), he will *not* come as a thief. We are looking out into the darkness of the world and *know* that he is about to appear. We know that at his appearing we can do nothing to change the outcome of whether we are invited to the wedding or not. We must therefore *watch*.

For those still convinced that the thief-like return of Jesus indicates secrecy, Peter makes it as clear as he can in 2 Peter 3:10. “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with *a great noise*, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” Note the Lord comes as a thief. Does he come quietly? Secretly? No! With *great noise*!!!

As it was in the days of Noah

There is one final passage to consider: Luke 17:24-37. Jesus compares his return to the days of Noah and Lot: “For as the lightning, that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven; so shall also the Son of man be in his day” (verse 24). In other words, you can't miss the day when the Son of man comes. It will be as bright as lightning across the whole sky.

Jesus then reminds us of how destruction came on those in the world in the days of Noah and Lot; how flood and fire destroyed them all. Jesus says it will be like that when he is revealed. Great destruction comes at the time he appears in the heavens. We are told that when he does appear like lightning in the sky, we must *not* gather our ‘stuff’. “Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed. In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.” We must take no thought for our belongings in that day. They will pass away with the world and its belongings. This could equate to the time of our trimming of lamps; our preparing to meet our Lord. Note that Jesus says, “Thus shall it be in *the day*” when he is revealed.

But after the warning not to gather our stuff we are then told in verse 34: “I tell you, in that night there shall be two in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left. Two shall be grinding together; the one shall be taken, and the other left. Two shall be in the field; the one shall be taken, and the other left.” Note that now Jesus says some time has passed – it is now *night*. Jesus is revealed in the *day* but we are gathered at *night*!! Once more, as with the parable of the 10 virgins, there is a delay between the Lord’s appearing and our being gathered.

And where are we taken? We are gathered like eagles to the body. Some say this is a dead body. Perhaps not. Luke 17:37 uses the Greek word “Soma”. This can be a living OR dead body. Paul writes to the Romans using the very same word: “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another” (12:5). So we could say thus; We (who are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord) will be gathered as eagles to the *body*. Being many, we are *one* body with Christ.

However in Matthew 24:28, using similar language, the Greek word “ptoma” is used which means carcase. Definitely a dead body! . It is only used 4 times and it can refer to the carcase of a nation or nations. See Revelation 11:8-9. Where is the place that the nations will fall? Israel. Where is the place that it will take 7 months to bury the dead corpses? Israel. Where will the eagles be taken? Israel. The Mount of Olives.

But why say we are gathered as eagles? Because we will be lifted into the very clouds themselves to meet out Lord in the air! As God himself says: “Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings, and brought you unto myself” (Exodus 19:4). We will be literally lifted up and gathered to be with him and taken to Israel where all nations will be judged.

We truly are most privileged to understand what is to come. We have a great and wonderful hope before us. Let us with all zeal gather the oil of faith into our lamps *now*, “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious *appearing* of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

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The following page is a table showing the order of events.

All verses quoted are in the exact sequence as written in the scriptures.

Order of events	Matthew 24	Mark 13	Luke 21	1 Thessalonians 4	1 Thessalonians 5	Revelation 1	1 Corinthians 15	Luke 17	Matthew 25
Jesus appears in heaven with his angels. The whole world see this and mourn. We will also witness this as well.	30 And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.	26 And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.	27 And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.	16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel	2 For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. 3 For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape.	7 Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.		24 For as the lightning, that lighteth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven; so shall also the Son of man be in his day. 29 But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. 30 Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed.	6 And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him.
A trumpet is blown	31 And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet			and with the trump of God:			52 In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump : for the trumpet shall sound		
The dead are raised and judged	and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven	27 And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds from the uttermost part of the earth		and the dead in Christ shall rise first:			and the dead shall be raised incorruptible		
Meanwhile those who are alive and remain begin to prepare to meet Jesus							31 In that day , he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back.	7 Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. 8 And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out.	
Sometime later the angels gather those who were alive and remain at his appearing.	to the other.	to the uttermost part of heaven.		17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air:			and we shall be changed.	34 I tell you, in that night there shall be two in one bed; the one shall be taken, and the other shall be left.	10 And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage:
Christ is united then with his ecclesia and descends to the Mount of Olives.				and so shall we ever be with the Lord.				37 And they answered and said unto him, Where, Lord? And he said unto them, Wheresoever the body is, thither will the eagles be gathered together.	:and the door was shut.
With spiritual Israel saved Jesus now saves natural Israel. He is eventually established as king on earth. See Zechariah 14 The final judgement of the nations begins See parables of Matthew 25.									

1 Peter 1:7 That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

**WHEN CHRIST APPEARS IN HEAVEN IT WILL BE TOO LATE TO HAVE FAITH.
WATCH THEREFORE: FOR YOU DO NOT KNOW WHAT HOUR YOUR LORD WILL COME**