

Question

Do we know when Jesus will return?

Answer

Here's the short answer: no. Please read the following long answer which is necessary so that the short answer can be understood.

Jesus spoke of his return in Matthew 24:36

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Three more times in Matthew 24, and a fifth time in Matthew 25:13, Jesus explicitly stated that no one knows the day of his return. It is safe to say Jesus was adamant that the time of his return was to be a sovereign mystery. FIVE TIMES, within the distance of about 25 verses, we are told that no one knows the day of the return of Christ. Only God knows.

We can read in Acts, chapter one, that after Jesus rose from the dead he appeared to his disciples for a period of 40 days and taught them many things about the kingdom of God. Those must have been very rich teaching sessions about all kinds of topics. It is instructive that we are not told what Jesus taught except for one or two little morsels. Here's one:

"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Jesus said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:6-7).

Let's review. Five times, in a short section in Matthew, Jesus stated that no one knows when the second coming of Christ will be: not the angels in heaven and not even the Son. Then, in Acts 1:7, we are told that we are NOT to know. Despite this very explicit and clear teaching from the Second Person of the Trinity, there are those who still persist in thinking that they know more than God Incarnate.

Some people justify their right to set a date for the return of Christ by citing a verse from the prophet Amos.

Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets (Amos 3:7).

This verse is understood as an absolute prerequisite that God must reveal ALL of his plans to his servants the prophets before he can act. Honest students of the Bible must ask themselves if this is what this verse means. The answer is no.

Amos was employing hyperbole. Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration to make a point. We all use hyperbole when we speak. For example, a person who is worried about something might say, "There's a ton of weight on my shoulders." No one thinks that there is a literal 2,000 lb. weight on this person. It's hyperbole. It's an exaggeration to make a point. Worry is crushing him. We get it.

Amos was using hyperbole to make it very clear to those hearing his message that what he was prophesying regarding Israel would be fulfilled without any doubt. Therefore, people had better listen closely to him. Hyperbolic language is used throughout the Bible. To press hyperbole beyond the scope of the common rules of language leads to absurdity. Below are three principles that will help us learn to read the Bible properly.

THREE PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER WHEN READING SCRIPTURE

1. Interpret smaller passages with larger passages

Another way to state this rule is to say that "Scripture interprets Scripture." We compare a small portion of Scripture with larger portions. Ultimately, we must consider all of Scripture in context as we interpret any smaller portion. Therefore, if we are told something very plainly and often, we are not to use a single verse to counter that teaching. We keep the smaller portion in context with the whole. We are very clearly and plainly told by Jesus himself that we are NOT to know the time of his return. To use one verse in Amos to counter a clearer teaching is not acting in a responsible manner.

Take another look at the verse in Amos. Notice the hyperbole. Notice that if we don't notice the hyperbole the verse becomes meaningless. If the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets, then the Sovereign LORD is no longer sovereign. Of course God has done things without revealing his plans to his prophets. Common sense should tell us that God has done a multitude of things without first consulting his prophets. Plus, we have Jesus himself (speaking from his human nature) that HE doesn't know when he will return. And it can be easily argued that Jesus outranks any other human prophet who ever existed, or ever will exist.

If people were truly interested in what the Sovereign LORD had to say, they would obey him. A careful reading of the accounts in Matthew 24-25, Acts 1 and other passages about the return of Christ will show that these passages are clearly focused on obedience and discipleship, not on guessing the date of the second coming of Christ.

2. Know the two main tests for a false prophet or a false teacher.

TEST # 1 – False Teaching

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he spoke takes place, and he says, “Let us follow other gods: (gods you have not known) “and let us worship them,” you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and all your soul. It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere.

Deuteronomy 13:1-4

Events that appear to be miraculous do not supersede Scripture. This is a difficult test because human nature gravitates toward the sensational. But here, we see that God is concerned about teaching. No miracle of any kind must lead a person to accept false teaching. All teaching must be measured by what has been already revealed by God and has become Scripture.

TEST # 2 – False Prophecy

You may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the LORD?” If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.

Deuteronomy 18:21-22

God demands 100% accuracy on any predictions of future events. The premise should be obvious: God makes no mistakes. Many religious leaders make bold proclamations of future events that do not transpire as predicted. Who will put their teachings to the test? This leads to a third principle.

3. Personal Responsibility

Personal responsibility comes under the heading of discipleship. Jesus left us with his very famous last words in the book of Matthew:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

Matthew 28:17-20

Please notice what Jesus was concerned about at the end of the age. It was not that we would know the time of his coming, but that we would be his disciples. A disciple is a learner. Disciples are people who are willing to learn how to obey. Religious leaders are not exempt from the call to learn how to obey. They too are called to obey God's Word.

Every believer is personally responsible to know Scripture. It is hard to know how to obey something if you don't know what it is you are to obey. One of the reasons so many false teachers can get away with their errant predictions of the return of Christ is that too many believers are asleep spiritually – the very thing Jesus was warning about when discussing the time of his return.

We must take up the mantle of discipleship. We are called to test all things to determine truth. (See 1 Thessalonians 5:17). We are called to be like the Bereans. (See Acts 17:11). We are not to believe everything, but test teachings. (See 1 John 4:1). This is our personal responsibility.