

Was Jesus a Failed Prophet?

The Problem of the Delayed Second Coming

The Objection

- Jesus claimed that he would return before “this generation” passed away, and he tied his return to the destruction of the temple.
- Jesus’ Second Coming (or “*parousia*”) did not happen within the lifetime of anyone there, including when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.
- Jesus was wrong in his prediction.
- Two routes for objections from here:
 1. If Jesus was wrong, then he was not perfect, and thus not God, so the Gospel is invalid.
 2. In addition, a fundamental premise of Christianity (as shown both in the historic creeds and in general belief) is invalid, and this casts severe doubt on the rest of the faith.
- Either way, this shows that the Gospel should not be trusted.

How To Discuss Difficult Passages

- When discussing difficult passages with a skeptic, we’re starting with different premises:
 - The Christian assumes the Bible’s truth, so all that’s necessary is to show that there is a logically coherent interpretation.
 - The skeptic does not make this assumption, so if an assumption that makes the Bible false is more likely than one that makes it true, the former reading is taken as the correct one.
- How do we show that a particular interpretation is likely to be true?
 1. Parsimony: a simpler explanation is often better than a more contrived one (Occam’s Razor).
 2. Harmony: a reading that fits well with the rest of Scripture is more likely than one that does not.

Different Views

Futurism

- **The Olivet Discourse is about multiple different events.**
- It's divided into multiple different sections, some about the destruction of the temple, and some about the end of the world.
- The condition that "this generation will not pass away" does not mean that Christ predicted he would come again before all of his followers died: rather, it refers to the fact that within the lifetime of the people there, they would learn the harsh truth of all that he had predicted.
- Some parts of the Discourse seem to indicate that at least some of the events will happen further in the future.
 - E.g., Mark 13:10 says that "the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations," which was unlikely to happen in such a short timespan.
- Even though the timeframe references seem somewhat unnatural and mixed up, in a prophetic passage like this, often a literal reading is not the best one.

Preterism

- **The Olivet Discourse is strictly about events that occurred in AD 70.**
- The passage appears homogeneous because it's all about the same event.
- The "Great Tribulation" refers to the siege of Jerusalem, not an eschatological period.
- The "end of the age" refers to the end of the Jewish age/dispensation, not the literal end of the world.
- The "coming [*parousia*] of the Son of Man" refers to God's "coming in judgement" upon Jerusalem (cf. Micah 1:3-5).
- The dramatic language refers to the horrific conditions surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem and expresses the Jewish view of the Temple and Jerusalem as the center of their world.
- The astrological phenomena are metaphorical, literary elements that are similar to the language used in Old Testament prophecies about destruction (cf. Isaiah 13:9-13).
- Two kinds of preterism:
 1. Full Preterism: all New Testament eschatology was fulfilled in AD 70.
 - The resurrection already happened, and was a purely spiritual resurrection.
 - Goes against the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, so it's very unorthodox.
 2. Partial Preterism: some New Testament eschatology (e.g., the resurrection, the Final Judgement) is yet to come.
 - Less simple than full preterism (two *parousias*, two judgements, etc.), but much more in line with orthodoxy and with general Christian belief.

The Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24 (ESV)

Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. ² But he answered them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” ⁴ And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray. ⁵ For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray. ⁶ And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ⁷ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. ⁸ All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake. ¹⁰ And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. ¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. ¹³ But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ¹⁴ And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

¹⁵ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), ¹⁶ then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁷ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house, ¹⁸ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. ¹⁹ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days! ²⁰ Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath. ²¹ For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no, and never will be. ²² And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short. ²³ Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There he is!’ do not believe it. ²⁴ For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. ²⁵ See, I have told you beforehand. ²⁶ So, if they say to you, ‘Look, he is in the wilderness,’ do not go out. If they say, ‘Look, he is in the inner rooms,’ do not believe it. ²⁷ For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ²⁸ Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

²⁹ “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

³² “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The Olivet Discourse in Mark 13 (ESV)

And as he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!”² And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

³ And as he sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew asked him privately,⁴ “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these things are about to be accomplished?”⁵ And Jesus began to say to them, “See that no one leads you astray.⁶ Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray.⁷ And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet.⁸ For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.

⁹ “But be on your guard. For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them.¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations.¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.¹² And brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death.¹³ And you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

¹⁴ “But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.¹⁵ Let the one who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything out,¹⁶ and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.¹⁷ And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!¹⁸ Pray that it may not happen in winter.¹⁹ For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be.²⁰ And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.²¹ And then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘Look, there he is!’ do not believe it.²² For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect.²³ But be on guard; I have told you all things beforehand.

²⁴ “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light,²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near.²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come.³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”