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Pastor Adam Parker

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Sermon Title: Jesus: False, Forgery, or For Real?

Sermon Text: Matthew 23:37-24:35

Matt. 23:37 ¶ “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Matt. 23:38 See, your house is left to you desolate.

Matt. 23:39 For I tell you, you will not see me again, until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Matt. 24:1 ¶ Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple.

Matt. 24:2 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.”

Matt. 24:3 ¶ 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?”

Matt. 24:4 And Jesus answered them, “See that no one leads you astray.

Matt. 24:5 For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and they will lead many astray.

Matt. 24:6 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.

Matt. 24:7 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places.

Matt. 24:8 All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

Matt. 24:9 ¶ “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.

Matt. 24:10 And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another.

Matt. 24:11 And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray.

Matt. 24:12 And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold.

Matt. 24:13 But the one who endures to the end will be saved.

Matt. 24:14 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.

Matt. 24:15 ¶ “So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand),

Matt. 24:16 then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.

Matt. 24:17 Let the one who is on the housetop not go down to take what is in his house,

Matt. 24:18 and let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak.

Matt. 24:19 And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days!

Matt. 24:20 Pray that your flight may not be in winter or on a Sabbath.

Matt. 24:21 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.

Matt. 24:22 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.

Matt. 24:23 Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it.

Matt. 24:24 For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.

Matt. 24:25 See, I have told you beforehand.

Matt. 24:26 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.

Matt. 24:27 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.

Matt. 24:28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Matt. 24:29 ¶ "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.

Matt. 24:30 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.

Matt. 24:31 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.

Matt. 24:32 ¶ "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.

Matt. 24:33 So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

Matt. 24:34 Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Matt. 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Main Point: Jesus is neither a false prophet, nor are the gospel records of his prophecies a later forgery; rather Jesus prophesied events that really took place.

Outline:

1. Jesus Accurately Predicted the Fall of the Temple
 - a. Its Total Destruction (24:1-2)
 - b. Its Desecration (24:15)
2. Jesus Accurately Predicted the Destruction of Jerusalem
 - a. Its Siege (24:16-22)
 - b. Its False Prophets (24:4-5, 23-27)

Introduction

Today's passage is incredibly divisive. Because on the one hand, it has been pointed to by skeptics as one of the greatest false prophecies ever made. A prophecy that according to some, to this day, has never come true. And others have pointed to this passage, at least as proof that the Gospels must have all been written after the life of Jesus and after the year 70 A.D. *because* it is so incredibly accurate. So unbelievers say this is a false prophecy, but they also say it's so accurate that it can't be real. That is quite a diversity of responses!

And still others – and I would include myself among them – point to this passage as an incredible *proof* of the fact that Jesus spoke truthfully and accurately and that he predicted real events that actually took place.

So you can see, it's an *incredibly* divisive passage.

On the one hand, you have those who thought this was a false prophesy. The famed 20th century atheist Bertrand Russell used to point to today's reading as proof that Jesus was a false prophet, because he said, "Look. There are all of these claims of an apocalypse, of stars falling from heaven, of this great tribulation, and these things never happened." For Bertrand Russell this was proof that Jesus was not a true prophet. Because it had been 2000 years and these things still hadn't taken place.

But then on the other hand you have 20th century liberal theologians who looked at this passage and what they saw was such an *incredibly* close description of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. that these scholars argued, “This *has* to have been written after the fall of Jerusalem.” The way that they reasoned, someone had to have gone back and put a description of the destruction of Jerusalem into Jesus’ mouth because – so they thought – he could never have actually made this prediction.

I want to do a couple of things here today. On the one hand, I want to persuade you between this week and my next sermon in two weeks, that Bertrand Russell was wrong. And he was wrong, because I’m going to argue here that these events have taken place.

But I also want you to know not to listen to the theological liberals who say that Jesus couldn’t have made this prediction. Their argument that Jesus could not have made this prediction rests entirely on the assumption that no man could accurately predict events before they take place. They do this not only with the Gospels, but they do it in the way they read prophecies in the Old Testament like we find in the book of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Daniel and others as well. And that happens when these scholars determine in advance that prophecies don’t happen, and can’t happen.

In this case, you have a record, written by Matthew – one of the 12 who were there on the Mount of Olives. Matthew heard this sermon and recorded it. The best evaluations by those who don’t have presuppositions against the supernatural are that Matthew was written at least 10-30 years before these events eventually took place in 70 A.D.

Besides just *telling* you that liberal scholars are biased against the supernatural (which they are), let me just mention one reason why it’s not crazy to believe Matthew wrote this before the fall of Jerusalem. There are things we would reasonably expect to find in this book if it had been written after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and those things just aren’t here.

Notice, for instance that all throughout Matthew, when a prophecy is fulfilled, Matthew is at pains to point it out (“this happened to fulfill what was written” and so on). His editorial presence is very heavy and he doesn’t mind interjecting in the

narrative wherever he feels it is necessary. However, what stands out most in Matthew is how he never makes an editorial point that these prophecies here came true... I would suggest the clearest explanation of that is, as of Matthew's writing, these things still hadn't taken place yet. That's a huge omission considering the way he is fine with editorializing all through the rest of his book.

But what we've been talking about is what we might call an unbelieving approach to the Gospel of Matthew: either assuming these things haven't happened at all, or that they were forged after they had happened to make it look like Jesus made a prophecy when really he hadn't.

But also I want you to know this: not everyone has responded to today's passage with faithlessness and unbelief.

One way that those who love God's word and love his scriptures have read this passage is by assuming that what we have here is not a false prophesy or a later forgery at *all*.

But some would differ from me in this way: they would say that what Jesus was talking about in our reading just hasn't happened yet. From their perspective, we're still awaiting the fulfillment of these words. Now, this might be the way the majority of evangelicals read this passage, actually. And *those* Christians argue that what we have here is a description of something that is *still* yet to come. That Jesus was saying these things, not for the disciples and for the Christians living within his own generation, really, but that these words and warnings were being preached so that people thousands of years *later* would be prepared for another destruction of Jerusalem, and the destruction of a different rebuilt temple much later than the time of the Apostles.

And so those who read the passage like this would say that the events of 70 AD just don't fit the bill. They're not apocalyptic enough. The destruction isn't total enough. The sky wasn't literally darkened and stars didn't physically fall from the sky (we'll talk about that imagery in two weeks). And so because of that, they even today look forward to the Jews having a rebuilt temple (since v. 15 mentions the temple) and a resuming of the sacrificial system that goes along with that. And the

belief is that until the temple is rebuilt, there can be no temple to be torn down, and if there's no temple to be torn down, then this prophecy of Jesus can't come true.

What I'll suggest is that there is a much simpler way of understanding this passage, and here it is:

Jesus here made a prophecy that really took place, and the temple was actually destroyed as Jesus predicted here.

And I would suggest that this is by far the answer that would have made the most sense to Jesus' original listeners, and it also can objectively be shown to have happened. If you were living in the years after Jesus preached and taught this, I am absolutely convinced that you would have believed that Jesus' prophecy was really taking place right before your eyes. And I'll show you later that early Christians did, in fact, believe that they were watching these words come true before their very eyes.

We see near the end of our reading that Jesus says these words: "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (24:34). Some read this and think "this generation" here refers to those whom Jesus was talking to.

Others think "this generation" is those who witness the signs Jesus points to here. And I'm going to tell you that I think both are grammatically possible. But I also think that it is by far simpler and more reasonable for Jesus' own listeners to think he was talking about them and those living during their time.

I believe that all of this passage we've read today, up to 24:35 is a prophecy by Jesus that came true 37 years later in 70 A.D. when the Roman general Titus came to Jerusalem and destroyed it, and pulled down every stone of the temple.

Now, I grew up in a church that did not believe this. In fact, I grew up not knowing *anything* about what happened to Jerusalem in 70 A.D., and I certainly had never heard of anyone believing that this was a prophecy that had actually come true already. If you are like me, I hope you'll at least be

open to hearing a different reading of these events than you might be used to.

Now, you may look at this passage and read chapter 24 and think,

“Well this is *weird*, because this sermon on the Mount of Olives isn’t just about the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, but it’s also about the end of the world and the final judgment. Isn’t that what chapter 25 talks about? If these events have taken place then what about the final judgment? Are you saying that’s already happened, pastor?”

No. I’m not. In fact, I want you to see that today’s reading, which ends in verse 35 is the last part of a teaching about something that Jesus says his listeners *can* know the day and the time of.

And I want you to see that starting in verse 36, which we’ll get to in a couple of weeks, everything after that Jesus says we *cannot* know the day and the time.

On your own time, just look through this passage (perhaps do it this week if you have the time), and make a mark any time Jesus says *when* something will happen, or when he says you can know something is going to happen. These are “time markers” in the passage.

And I want you to notice these time markers because this is a passage that is *saturated* in a conviction by Jesus that he knows when these things he’s describing will happen, he knows how all his listeners can tell when they will happen. And he is so specific that he even knows how people can tell when it’s time to run for the hills! Jesus gives the time frame and the events surrounding this prophecy. He sees it as entirely predictable, and he does predict it and even says when it will happen.

Now, we aren’t there yet, but in comparison, if you look at the reading beginning in verse 36, you will notice that as soon as today’s passage ends, Jesus starts talking about the final judgment. And once he starts talking about that, all of the time predictions, time markers, and signs of the event drop from his vocabulary for the rest of the sermon. He stops talking about *when* the events there are coming and instead, he focuses only on how to prepare for the final judgment. And that is

because in comparison to today's passage about the fall of Jerusalem, the next passage which we'll focus on in a couple of weeks, is about the final judgment and *cannot* be predicted or have a date pinned on it. Jesus insists that we can know when the events of Matthew 24:1-35 will take place, and he also will insist that no one knows the day and hour of *that* event in verse 36 onward.

And that is why I'm very confident that what we have before us is one sermon and discourse, and what comes in our next reading is a different sermon from Jesus about an event that we *don't* have the time markers for.

And so this week I hope to convince you that Jesus is not a false prophet, and that everything he predicted up to verse 35 has happened. We don't have a lot of time to do this, but I want to spend time this week very simply touching on some aspects of the literal predictions Jesus made and how they've come true.

In two weeks, once I've returned from General Assembly, I want to focus on the *meaning* of the events as Jesus sees them. In particular, Jesus talks about these events being the "end of the age," he speaks of them as his "coming," and he speaks of these events in terms of "judgement." So he interprets what happens here. And some of those things Jesus says may create questions that we'll labor to answer next week.

Now, Matthew and I have recorded a podcast to go along with today's sermon. Once you finish this sermon you may have a lot of questions, and want to know more historical details. We have given that to you in the podcast. So if you search for "Evergreen Beaverton Podcast" on your favorite podcast app, you should find it. You can also find it just by looking around on our church's website. We recorded this as a companion episode. It should go live right after I finish preaching today, and I do hope for those of you who want to study this more that you'll give that a listen. We go into a lot more depth than I'm able to in this sermon.

But for today, in the very brief time we have remaining, I want to point to historical events that dovetail with what Jesus says here so that you can at least be convinced that there is a really incredible similarity between what Jesus predicted here and what we know from history has taken place.

Let me mention two items.

1. Jesus Accurately Predicted the Fall of the Temple

The first reason I want you to be convinced that Jesus is a true prophet from our passage today is that Jesus accurately predicted the fall of the temple. The disciples are admiring the temple buildings, then Jesus says something in verse 2:

“Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Now, we know that this has happened. If you go to Jerusalem today, the entire temple is gone. The only thing that is left is the foundation stones of one wall on the western side of the temple. The entire temple is leveled. Even today you can see the stones of the temple thrown down into the streets. They still sit there even today. Not to belabor things too much, **but there is no need for a rebuilt temple in order for this prophecy to come true. It already has come true.**

Later, in verse 15, Jesus anticipates something else related to the temple:

“So when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”

Jesus speaks of an abomination of desolation standing in the holy place here. If you wanted a really literal reading he is saying “the sacrilege that produces desolation.” In other words, some sacrilegious event in the holy place of the temple.

Now I don't know if this is going to seem evasive to you, but there are many candidates for this in history, and it's hard to be absolutely sure which event Jesus is referring to here, because so many possibilities exist. Let me mention three possibilities:

One possibility: this is Titus and the Roman army surrounding Jerusalem. In this view, the army is the abomination, and we know that it's the abomination because of the literal desolation that takes place after they surround Jerusalem.

Another possibility: Some Jewish commentators who come later report that Titus did deeply wicked things in the inner chamber of the temple. If their reports are

accurate, then when Titus enters the temple and desecrates it, that would be the abomination Jesus is predicting.

Still a third possibility: Prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, the Jewish Zealots took control of the temple. They really were like terrorists. They murdered people and took over the temple. When they did this, they appointed their own high priests. Now, there was an attempt by the Jews to remove the zealots from the temple. In a speech before this attempt, the senior chief priest gave a speech where he said these words, recorded by Josephus: “Truly well had it been for me to have died before I had seen the house of God laden with such abominations and its unapproachable and hallowed places crowded with the feet of murderers!”

This was a season of great tumult and trouble, and I think that any of these three events could be seen as the abomination that Jesus speaks of. All of them fit the bill. If you wanted my best guess, I think the third event seems like the strongest possibility, but I don’t think I could prove to you exactly which one it was.

In either case, I think we can be sure that Jesus’ words were sure and true, and Jerusalem really was subject to this abomination just as Jesus spoke of in verse 2 and verse 15 of our passage. There are many ways that it could rightly be said to have taken place.

Time prohibits me from going more in depth here. But at least I want you to see that Jesus is a true prophet because he accurately predicted the destruction and desecration of the temple.

2. Jesus Accurately Predicted the Destruction of Jerusalem

The second reason I want you to see that Jesus is a true prophet is that he accurately predicted the destruction of Jerusalem. Not just the temple, but the city itself.

This isn’t the only place where Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem. Back in Matthew 22, he told the parable of the wedding feast, and if you remember because the people attacked and even killed the king’s messengers, Jesus makes a prediction within the parable that is blatantly a prediction about Jerusalem as well: “[the king] sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city”

(22:7). That parable expressed an idea of judgment for the murder and rejection of the king's messengers who had been sent. And the implication was that Jerusalem had in fact rejected the king's messengers and prophets that were sent before. In fact, what does he say in 23:37? "Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

What does Jesus predict for Jerusalem? Well let me just focus on a few major predictions. First, he predicts the siege of Jerusalem in verses 15-22. Luke includes one helpful phrase that Matthew doesn't include. Luke 21:20 says, "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near." So Luke explicitly includes Jesus' prediction that Jerusalem will be surrounded. Matthew tells his listeners that when the abomination of desolation takes place, it's their last chance to flee. And he gives a sad encouragement for his followers to escape Jerusalem. That section begins in verse 16. For time's sake we won't read it again.

But here's what we know from history:

After Titus took over the temple complex and massacred the thousands of people hiding out in it, it took another month for the rest of Jerusalem to fall. Historians tell us that when it fell, the Romans and their Syrian and Greek auxiliary

"poured into the alleys and massacred indiscriminately all whom they met and burned the houses with all who had taken refuge within."

So if there was any time when it was right to flee, Jerusalem, it was after the temple was taken. (*Jerusalem: A Biography*, pg 61)

The Christian historian Eusebius tells us that Christians in Jerusalem *did* flee across the Jordan River to Pella in the Decapolis during Rome's siege of Jerusalem in AD 70. Eusebius specifically points out that this was in fulfillment of Jesus' command. The Christians at that time had a strong sense that Jesus had spoken of this moment, and later Christians also interpreted the flight of Christians from Jerusalem as an intentional obedience to this command of Jesus where he says to flee to the mountains.

Another aspect of the destruction of Jerusalem that Jesus mentions is false prophets claiming to be the messiah surrounding the time of these events. He mentions these in verses 4-5 and verses 23-27.

We know that this prediction of Jesus came true in the years after his ascension, of course. Many did come claiming to be the Messiah, the Christ. The book of Acts mentions three false prophets: Theudas, Judas the Galilean, and someone called “the Egyptian.”

In the time *after* Acts, we know that the Jewish historian Josephus tells us of a whole raft of false prophets and those claiming to be Messiahs in the time following the death of Jesus.

“Achiab, the cousin of Herod; Judas, the son of a brigand chief named Ezekias; Simon, a slave of Herod; Athronges and his brothers,” another fellow named Theudas, a self-proclaimed prophet from Egypt, and “a certain imposter who promised salvation and rest from troubles if anyone chose to follow him into the wilderness.”

Remember: my point is not that events happened here that couldn't have happened in any other time. We know of other times that the temple was desecrated, but it is simply to say, “If you are looking for a time when the predictions of Jesus came true, you should look to the events of the destruction of Jerusalem.”

The point, of course, is that we can trust Jesus. We can know that he spoke the truth. We can believe his words.

Conclusion

I know that I have barely scratched the surface of this passage. There is so much to say here. And I'm also not sure in the time I have that we can arrive at a totally satisfying conclusion.

But as we close, just reflect on this a moment: if you are here today hearing this word, then you should know that a greater judgment than what came upon Israel will also come for all of us. There's a reason Jesus moves from talking about the

judgment of Jerusalem to talking about the final judgement. It's because none of us are exempt. Jerusalem one day had to face the judgment. And one day we will each need to give an account.

The real question is, will we listen to the words of warning? Will we follow the way of escape that God has given to us in Christ, or will we foolishly try to stand and face the judgment alone and without the Son of God and Savior of sinners?

Let's pray.