

A Hard Word against God?

Malachi 3:13–18

“Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.’”

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. “They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Christians are used to speaking *up* for God, but more and more today we hear strong words, words hard to hear, harsh words, spoken against God, words of defiance. People use words to declare their independence from God. You hear it all over our culture.

“Your words have been hard against me,” the Lord says through his prophet Malachi in our text today, and he calls his people to account for those words, their hard words against him. “Evildoers think they can put God to the test and even escape.”

What about us? When have you or I been tempted to say, “It’s useless to serve God!” “Where’s my cut? When do I get what’s coming to me?” “Doesn’t God want me to be happy? Hello? God? Are you really there?” We think we can badger God into doing what we want, put him to the test, bend him to our will, whether it’s really for our good or not.

So the Lord, by his prophet, urges us to look up from ourselves to see him, to fear him, to repent, to stand in awe of him, and to trust his promises. We cannot speak against him or test him. He want us to look back and remember all his works for us. Even when it seems God is far away, when we are tempted to speak against him or put him to the test,

he leads us to remember his promises, to remember that he will never forget his people. We have no need to test God or speak against him, because God always keeps His promises.

Do you hear what they were saying? “God doesn’t care about us. We’re his people, but we don’t get any better deal than the people who ignore him, and do whatever they want. They don’t get punished; they get off scot-free. We’re wasting our time being people of God!”

Well, let’s check the facts. The prophet reports that those who feared the Lord spoke with one another, and the Lord heard! He paid attention and caused to be written “a book of remembrance . . . before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name” (v 16).

What happens when the Lord remembers? It’s not that he suddenly remembers something he’d forgotten, but that he holds his promises up for all to see. He remembers his covenant. He remembers his people (Ex 28:12). They are engraved in his hand (Is 49:16). That is, he keeps his promises. Just like all the young people who want to remember something important write it on their hands and arms in washable ink. God ENGRAVES it on His hand!

How do we know God keeps his promises? OUR book of remembrance is written down -- here in the Scriptures, in the Word of God. And the Word of God does what it says, brings what it promises.

Fittingly, this Last SUNDAY of the Church Year, the Old Testament lesson comes from Malachi, the last BOOK of the Old Testament. It’s God’s last word to Israel before the fulfillment of his greatest promise. The NEXT time God comes around, it’s going to be in person—in the person of the promised baby in Bethlehem. It’s going to be four hundred more years of waiting, but he is going to come. What God’s Word says, happens.

St. Paul allows us to step back and see the effect on the whole cosmos of God’s Word in Jesus: “that in him all things hold together, . . . and through him [God reconciles] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col 1:17, 20).

In other words, promises were kept. The Word of God was fulfilled in the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Now he makes you -- and me -- his treasured possession, just as he promised Israel: "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession" (v 17a). Already a thousand years before Malachi, God had said this to his Old Testament, covenant people: "If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples" (Ex 19:5). Now in the New Testament age, he says it to you in I Peter 2: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession."

The LORD has compassion on us. The LORD says, "I will spare them as a man spares his son" (v 17b).

The irony here is that, while a man spares his son, in the case of *this* son, the Son of God, God did not spare him, did not have compassion on him, but sent him to the cross. He required his suffering and death. And Jesus could not save himself from the cross -- if he wanted to save us. But God did it all so that he might have compassion on us, might put our sins on Jesus, and make us his sons and daughters. His promise of everlasting love and compassion is fulfilled in Christ.

Our faith may be put to the test by our circumstances, but God's purpose is only to refine us, to strip away from us anything that might separate us from him, and to show us ever more clearly the Christ who is *for us*.

Even when WE forget, he... remembers... us. He makes us his own. He makes you his treasured possession, putting his name on you in Baptism and speaking his forgiveness. By the power of his Word in Baptism, he unites you with the death and resurrection of Jesus. His Word does not simply convey information; his Word DOES what it says. It brings what it promises. You can count on it.

In the Sacrament of remembrance, as often as we "do this in remembrance" of him, he remembers his promise, and by his Word he places into your mouth his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. His Word does what it says.

So whatever your trials or blessings, you will go out from this place as God's treasured possession. You live in the promises kept. You know that Jesus is King from the cross and from his open and empty grave. This Last Sunday of the Church Year directs us to look forward to Jesus' return. And WHEN he returns, "You shall see the distinction between the

righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him" (v 18). He NEVER forgets that!

There is no need to test God. There's no need to speak against him, because God keeps his promises. "He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead . . . that in everything he might be preeminent" (Col 1:18). Your name is written in his book of life because of your relationship with Jesus. He will remember you forever. Amen.

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