

"Promises"

Text: Malachi 4:1-6

May the God of all grace supply you with every good thing *in Jesus Christ* our Lord. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Have you ever tried to lift something, only to grab hold, give it a mighty heave, and realize it is way too heavy even to budge? Or have you ever tried to hold something back, only to quickly realize that the force you are trying to resist cannot possibly be resisted? More to the point this morning, have you ever tried to hold something back as the force or pressure steadily increased – alarmingly so – to the point where you knew you couldn't resist it?

Whether we recognize it or not, Christians – one and all – find themselves in much the same predicament today. The escalating flood of evil and unbelief that is the Godless world today continues to press us back, to crush us down. The ever-increasing force is so great, most of us no longer harbor any illusions that we possess the strength, in and of ourselves, to bear up under the incredible weight. The ever-present temptation is to just give up, give in, and allow ourselves to be carried along by the raging torrent of perversion, sin, and unbelief to which so many of our fellow-citizens have yielded.

One of the reasons we go to church each Sunday, attend Bible Classes, and read our Bibles faithfully has to do with this very phenomenon. It is to gain the *outside* source of strength or power necessary to bear up. More than that, it is to gain the *resolve* to continue the struggle, even when all seems hopeless, the burden too great, and the collapse inevitable.

To gain such strength and resolve there are a couple of hard cold facts – *promises* – of which we need to be reminded on a daily basis. The first has to do with the goal. The second is the price of failure. The first is unimaginably fantastic, the second unspeakably horrible.

With this bit of sobering reality, we are prepared to hear the words of our text, recorded by the Prophet Malachi as the final verses of the Old Testament. Here we are reminded, in particular, of the reality of exactly what the cost will be for all who yield the struggle and reject God's salvation plan.

^{ESV} **Malachi 4:1-6** *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. ² But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. ³ And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. ⁴ ¶ "Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵ ¶ "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."*

These are the very words of our God. Thankful that he has again given us the rare privilege to grow through the study of these his divine words, and trusting in his promise that he will always bless us with all the strength we need through the hearing of these words, so we pray, **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

I would guess that most here have heard the old line often enough that you could fill in the blank without much conscious thought. If one movie character asks: *"Is that a threat?"* The other will almost certainly reply: *"No, that's a _____."*

Is there anyone over the age of about 10 that doesn't know that the missing word is *"promise"*? *"That's not a threat. That's a promise."* As corny as that line has become, it is actually surprisingly appropriate for our topic this morning. The devil hates whatever God uses to save souls. The devil therefore hates the Law. But the Law doesn't save, does it? Obviously we are not saved by keeping God's Law, but God still *uses* the power of the Law in our lives for our good. How exactly? He uses the Law to control the old Adam (the sinful flesh) in every Christian. God knows that there is simply no reasoning with our sinful flesh, which just plainly loves sin – and love *to* sin. The old Adam in us would, if allowed control, stupidly and consistently carry each of us into eternal damnation. Therefore, like any brute beast, that evil in us has to be controlled with the whip and the club of the Law.

Yet just here is where the difference between the threat and the promise of the Law comes into play. While we often talk about the threat of the Law, God's cause would probably be better served if we would talk instead about the *promise* of the Law. Clearly we are

reluctant to use the words "promise" and "law" in the same sentence - with good reason. Yet the word "promise" – when attached to a reliable source - indicates that something *will* happen. It actually says nothing about good or bad. The problem with "threat" is that we have grown cynical and skeptical about the reality of most threats. We hear various hollow threats all the time, and we have learned to greet most with a yawn. Our national enemies have forever been threatening to *"reduce our country to rubble and ashes."* Nothing ever seems to come of it. On a more individual level, what child hasn't grown up hearing a rather colorful variety of threats on the playground – almost none of which are ever really meant, let alone carried out. The result is that we no longer take most threats seriously, which is why it would probably be helpful to use a different word to describe those things that *our God* has revealed to us – particularly concerning unbelief and hell.

So this morning we ask this question: *"Does God threaten, or does he simply promise?"* Interesting question, for a variety of reasons. "Threat" tends to indicate emotion and manipulation on the part of the one threatening. "Promise" is just a statement of what will happen. Our ever more permissive society happily embraces the idea that there is never any real downside or negative promise of any kind in connection with "God," only threats – and idle threats at that. They take sayings like "God is love" to mean that life will always be butterflies and Skittles, and that the real God is never anything but permissive and benevolent. They like that idea mostly because such a view helps them to sleep at night. They acknowledge that God does occasionally make threats, but only those that he doesn't really intend to keep.

Again, our old Adam takes great delight in such nonsensical images of God. Like the spoiled brat in the grocery store that has learned from experience that mom's threats are all cloud and no hail, our sinful flesh longs to be able to dismiss what God says about unbelief, sin, and hell in the Bible as just more idle threats in a long line of scare tactics used to manipulate our behavior.

Is that the sort of thing that we find in our text for this morning? Is this just more Middle Eastern exaggeration intended not only to keep an undisciplined, rebellious people in line but to give them some sort of false hope for the future if they obey? In other words, are messages like our text for this morning simply idle threats? If that were indeed the case, as far as I am concerned we might just as well close our Bibles and not waste our time. If God's Word makes idle threats, then not only do we really have nothing to fear, we really have nothing to *trust*. If we have nothing to fear, then why not just follow any and every inclination of our sinful flesh and

enjoy absolution from our "Grampa God" in the end. So also if what God's Word tells us about punishment is fictitious, how can we have any hope or confidence in any of his other promises – in particular those that relate to eternal life and salvation?

Were then the words of our text idle threats or solemn promises? Let me ask it this way: *How many Babylonians do you know? How many Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Romans?* Yet there are Jews everywhere, aren't there. Was it then an idle threat when God promised to grind Israel's enemies into the dust of history, but to forever preserve the remnant of Israel? Do you realize just how unlikely – to the point of impossible – those promises were? How could it ever prove true that tiny Israel would prevail over the world powers of that day? Put it into modern terms and you will begin to get an idea. Promising to annihilate their enemies while preserving at least a remnant of the Jewish nation would be something like saying that China, Russia, and the United States will be utterly destroyed, but the country of Liechtenstein will live on forever.

The bottom line in all of this is that God does not make the sort of threats to which we have grown accustomed. God makes promises; that is, he always and only makes honest, unembellished statements about what will and will not happen in the future. Among those promises is the terrifying reality of hell, together with the *promise* that those sinners who do not believe in Jesus Christ will spend an eternity in that unspeakably terrible place.

Do not allow Satan to rob you of this truth, for without it our sinful flesh will most certainly carry us to that place of unimaginable horrors. Does our God threaten? No. He *promises: "He that believes not will be condemned."*

It is against this dark and ominous backdrop that the other promises of God break as with the light of a thousand suns. In other words, without the darkness of the promise of God's wrath toward all unbelief, mankind would have – could have – no appreciation for God's promise of deliverance through faith in Jesus Christ.

As was mentioned earlier, our text represents the very end of the Old Testament. Listen again to those last two verses and hear two separate promises from God: ***"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land***

with a decree of utter destruction." Note well how, far from threatening idly, God holds out to all of mankind two possibilities: Hearts will be turned to faith in Jesus Christ, or there will be utter destruction.

Now do yourself a favor and experience these verses in a new way. Don't stop at the end of the Old Testament; rather read these words together with the first verse of the New Testament: **"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction."** (Matthew 1:1) **"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham..."**

Jesus was not only God's greatest Promise, he represents our only hope for salvation. God does not threaten; God promises – and he has indeed kept his promise to provide a Savior, his Son Jesus Christ. In this great Promise we find our only lasting joy and comfort – our strength. The promises of mortal men may fail, but we can cling to this *divine* promise for all eternity: God has accepted the life and death of Jesus Christ as the satisfactory payment-in-full for the sins of world. God the Father promised to send his Son, and he kept that promise. He promised to render his verdict on how well Jesus carried out his work of salvation by the sign of the tomb on Easter Sunday. The empty tomb is therefore God's promise that the debt of every single sin has been paid in full. Salvation has been won. Our rescue has been achieved. Here too we have God's promise.

Note that this message of pure joy does not cancel the promise of hell for all who do not trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness; it rather magnifies it. We need God's promise of life eternal through faith in Jesus Christ precisely because his other promise is also rock solid true. Trust God's promises as you continue to labor in the Lord's service against ever-increasing opposition and ridicule – including his promises to "be with you always," (Matthew 28:20) to never allow you to be tempted beyond what you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13), and that the devil must flee when you resist him (James 4:7). Look especially during the dark days to our Savior-God's final promise: to return to this broken world and to take us home. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **2 Thessalonians 3:6-13** Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. ¹³ As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

^{ESV} **Luke 21:5-24** And while some were speaking of the temple, how it was adorned with noble stones and offerings, he said, ⁶ "As for these things that you see, the days will come when there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." ⁷ And they asked him, "Teacher, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when these things are about to take place?" ⁸ And he said, "See that you are not led astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is at hand!' Do not go after them. ⁹ And when you hear of wars and tumults, do not be terrified, for these things must first take place, but the end will not be at once." ¹⁰ ¶ Then he said to them, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. ¹¹ There will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and pestilences. And there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. ¹² But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. ¹³ This will be your opportunity to bear witness. ¹⁴ Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, ¹⁵ for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. ¹⁶ You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. ¹⁷ You will be hated by all for my name's sake. ¹⁸ But not a hair of your head will perish. ¹⁹ By your endurance you will gain your lives.

ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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23rd Sunday after Pentecost – Nov. 17, 2019

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 473 (Stanzas 1-2, 4) (Red Hymnal)

"The Church's One Foundation"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (2 Thessalonians 3:6-13) The Thessalonians took Paul's foretelling of the Second Coming of Christ as something that would happen at any moment. Nothing wrong with that, except that they quit their jobs and became idle gossips. In this lesson Paul gives direction on how Christians are to wait. Today, as then, we are to work and witness while we wait for our Lord's return. Let any weariness that we experience be the result of our energetic labors, not the result of discouragement and inactivity – weary *from*, not *of*, doing good.

Psalm of the Day – Psalm 121 (Supplement page 42) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (Luke 21:5-24) As our attention is refocused in this lesson on Christ's Second Coming, we are also reminded that although that Day holds no terror for us, the same is not true for unbelievers. Be wise. Read the signs of the times and be reminded to work and witness *now*, so that as many as possible might be spared the terrible wrath that will crush all who deny Jesus Christ when he returns.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed (Brown Hymnal page 15)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 477 (Stanzas 1-2) (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Jesus, Thou the Church's Head"

The Sermon – Text: Malachi 4:1-6 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Promises"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post Sermon Hymn – 477 (Stanzas 3-4) (Red Hymnal)

"Lord Jesus, Thou the Church's Head"

The Prayers

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 473 (Stanza 5) (Red Hymnal)

"The Church's One Foundation"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (40)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Class
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee hour

CLC News – Pastor Michael Eichstadt is considering the call to ILC.

Steven Sydow is considering the call to Berea of Sioux Falls. Pastor Ben Libby has returned the call to Trinity of Spokane. The current YTD deficit in the General Fund of the CLC is now over \$100,000.

Houston Area Services – Following the dissolution of Bethel

Congregation, the remaining CLC members in the Houston area have taken the first steps in reorganizing. They plan to meet each Sunday at 5:30pm in a rented facility in the north Houston suburb of Conroe, TX. The group will be served on a rotating basis by Pastor Matt Hanel, Pastor Sam Naumann, and Pastor Emeritus David Baker. For more information, including service location, please see Pastor Roehl.

Looking Ahead – Our annual Thanksgiving service is scheduled for Wednesday, November 27 at 7pm. Our midweek Advent services will follow on the next three Wednesdays (December 4, 11, and 18th.) The Annual Church Christmas party is scheduled for Saturday, December 7 (please consult the sign-up sheet on the mailbox table) and our Annual Voters Meeting is scheduled for Sunday, December 22.

In Our Prayers – Leota Schiermeister is recovering from a recent surgery in Minneapolis. Pray that our Lord would grant her a full and speedy recovery.