

February 11

Numbers 22, 23 and 24

Today you read one of the strangest stories in the whole Bible and encountered one of the most mysterious people in Scripture.

Before we get too bogged down with the mysterious Balaam, son of Beor, however, I want to nail down the biggest lesson that our text teaches us: When God has determined to bless a people, nothing but nothing but nothing is going to ever interfere with or block that plan. God had purposed to bless Israel and no one - not an opposing king, and not a renegade 'prophet', - no one was going to succeed in staying His hand.

I am certain that in our lives and in our churches, we are from time to time going to experience some rather significant amounts of opposition. If however, we know, as Israel did here, that we are moving in the direction that God has planned, nothing will ever cause us to lose His blessing or thwart His purpose for us. And should we ever find ourselves in the unenviable position of standing against the genuine work of God, we ought to understand right up front that we will never be able to succeed in stopping it. We will be wasting time, energy, money and opportunity for repentance, just like old King Balak. It may be that from time to time you can fight city hall and get away with it, but friend - you can't fight God. That will never ever work!

So far, in our study of the Word of God, we have met characters about whom we have so many questions and so few answers, that it is both fascinating and frustrating to talk about them. One of the supremely mysterious characters in the Old Testament so far is, of course, Balaam, son of Beor, the strange 'prophet-for-hire' of Numbers 22-24. At first blush, as we read Numbers 22-24, he appears to be a genuine prophet of God - a good guy who stands for righteousness. He acknowledges the Lord (Jehovah), he constantly says, *"I cannot go beyond the command of the Lord my God"* - *"I can't say anything that he does not tell me."* He appears to be able to communicate with God on almost an 'at-will' basis. He unquestionably brings back indisputably genuine messages from the Lord. He blesses Israel and even delivers wonderful prophecies! - He must be a good guy.

But there are some disturbing little hints. Balak, the king of Moab, clearly has the belief that for a sum of money Balaam's services are available for hire. While Balaam makes it quite clear that he cannot say anything that the Lord does not allow, he doesn't seem to have a problem with taking money in exchange for his services. That is something a prophet in the Old Testament would never do. In fact, if you read the account a little more carefully, it appears very much like Balaam is holding out for higher and higher fees. *"Even if Balak gave me his palace filled with silver and gold, I could not do anything..."* If he really meant that, wouldn't he have sent them away right away? He doesn't. In fact, he invites them to stay the night, while he re-negotiates the matter with the Lord.

Then there is the matter of the donkey. If Balaam had really been the Lord's prophet, wouldn't he have had the spiritual eyes to see the angel on the road? More than that, we are specifically told at the beginning of chapter 24, that Balaam was in the habit of using sorcery to work his craft. That was something specifically prohibited in the Old Testament on the pain of death. A second look at Balaam then suggests that he was not a good guy - not a true prophet of the Lord at all - and it is this opinion that is upheld by the rest of the writers of Scripture. Peter, writing in his second Epistle, says, "*Balaam, the son of Beor, loves the wages of wickedness.*"

Now - what difference does it make? Just this. God used a bad man to bless Israel. He used a scoundrel to utter some of the most wonderful prophecies about Israel. He used a greedy schemer to articulate a great Messianic prophecy. And this is the point. In His sovereign wisdom, God not only turns the wickedness of His enemies into works and actions that further His purposes, He sometimes even uses men and women who have no spiritual depth or life in themselves to say and do wonderful things. Balaam prophesied good things regarding Israel, but that did not make him a follower of Jehovah. Today, He still from time to time blesses the message even when it comes from the lips of charlatans. In recent times, we have seen several men who were preaching a gospel message and apparently having a positive Biblical impact on many lives, fall into the greatest kinds of sin, only to discover that these things had been going on in their lives for many years - all the while the message was being preached and the ministry was bearing fruit! God blessed the message even though it came from the lips of a scoundrel.

You know that God never does things capriciously - there is always a reason (even though we don't always understand that reason). That's why the use of Balaam's donkey to deliver a message from God is such an interesting thing. Do you know what I think was going on? I think that the donkey is an object lesson and that God is saying to Balaam - 'you are just like your donkey - just like you tried to drive that donkey on even though he saw things you couldn't see - and just like you did it until finally the angel of the Lord absolutely stopped you - so Balak is going to drive you on - even though you see what he cannot - until I absolutely stop you by an encounter with Me. Just like I opened the mouth of a dumb donkey and put My words in it, so I can open the mouth of a blind, brain-dead prophet and make him speak My words. - Balaam - you are just like that poor donkey you are abusing!'

1. The most amazing prophecy in this passage is the one found in Numbers 24:17. Balaam says, "I see him but not now; I behold him but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel..." A star that leads to a king...sound familiar? Over a thousand years later, some new mystery men - wise men - rode into the city of Jerusalem. They came looking for the Messiah. "We have seen His star in the East" (that is the direction from which Balaam came). Only a very few in Israel were watching for Him. Simeon, Anna and a few others - but wise men - stargazers from the East were watching - somehow they knew about the prophecy that God put in the

mouth of Balaam and so they came.

Balak discovered that you cannot frustrate the will and plan of God. Balaam discovered that he had a lot in common with his donkey. Israel discovered that "who God blesses He will bless."

One last thing: There is a very important bit of theology that comes from the mouth of our prophet for hire. It's worth memorizing. It's found in Numbers 23:19. This is what it says: *"God is not a man that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change his mind. Does He speak and then not act? Does He promise and not fulfill?"* That rhetorical question coming from the lips of the pagan prophet teaches us a great deal that is true and important about our God.

This has been Mark Ashton reminding you that God tells the truth and his blessings cannot be thwarted.