

The Book of Numbers

The Words of Balaam

Text: Numbers 22 – 24

I. Background of Balaam

- A. There seems to be much confusion over the character and story of Balaam.
 - 1. Many seem to think that he was a true prophet of God whose only sin was his greed.
 - 2. Some think that he proves that God still spoke to men as in the Patriarchal Age.
 - 3. Thus, many wonder over God's anger toward Balaam.
- B. The record of Scripture makes it clear that Balaam was a man who practiced occult arts and was not a true prophet of God.
- C. Balaam had learned of Jehovah because of God's destruction of the Egyptians.
 - 1. This was one purpose of God's actions against Egypt (Exodus 9:13-16).
 - 2. By His victory over Egypt, God proved Himself to be the only true and living God (cf. Exodus 12:12).
 - 3. Word of God's miraculous deeds spread throughout the world (cf. Josh. 2:9-11).
 - a. Note that Rahab heard this message and showed her faith by submitting to God and His people.
 - b. On the other hand, Balaam had learned the same truth but only wanted to use the name of God for his own personal gain.
- D. Balaam was a sorcerer – one who deceived people by occult practices.
 - 1. Numbers 22:7 – Balak send the “rewards of divination” because Balaam was known to be a sorcerer (one who divines).
 - 2. Numbers 23:23 – Balaam used the words “enchantment” and “divination” because that what he had been hired to bring against Israel.
 - 3. Numbers 24:1 – This verse implies that Balaam had been seeking for enchantments against Israel.
 - 4. Joshua 13:22 – Balaam is called a soothsayer, one who uses divination.
- E. Balaam is never referred to as a prophet of God.
 - 1. There is only one time that the word ‘prophet’ is associated with Balaam.
 - 2. In 2 Peter 2:15-16 Balaam is called a prophet – but only in the context of false prophets.
- F. Another parallel to Balaam is Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8).
 - 1. Simon deceived many with his occult practices.
 - 2. However, he was changed when he witnessed the true power of God through the Holy Spirit working in Philip.
 - 3. Unlike Balaam, when Simon was rebuked for his greed, he repented.
- G. Balaam was an enemy of God and of Israel (Numbers 31:8, 16; cf. 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14).

II. The Hiring of Balaam

(Numbers 22:1-6)

- A. The children of Israel arrived in the plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from the city of Jericho.
- B. Thus, they are at the very border of the Promised Land.

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- C. Balak, King of Moab, was afraid of the Israelites because of their victories against the Amorites and the people of Bashan.
 - 1. The name Balak means, “Waster, devastator; one who lays waste or devastates.”
 - 2. However, Balak was afraid that he could not devastate Israel; rather, they would destroy him.
- D. Thus, he sought to hire Balaam to pronounce a curse upon the nation of Israel.
 - 1. Balaam lived in Pethor, a city on the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia (cf. Deut. 23:4).
 - 2. This is a distance of about 400 miles from Moab.
- E. Balak had heard that Balaam was a powerful sorcerer.
 - 1. Whoever he blessed would be blessed and whoever he cursed would be cursed.
 - 2. However, God was greater and had promised Abraham, “I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee” (Gen. 12:3).

III. The Response of Balaam

(Numbers 22:7-21)

- A. The elders of Moab brought great riches to Balaam to entice him to answer their call.
- B. Before agreeing to go, Balaam waited to hear what the Lord would command him.
- C. God made His will clear to Balaam: “Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people.”
- D. Thus, Balaam refused to go with the Moabites.
- E. They reported this to Balak who sent even more riches and promises to Balaam, begging him to come to Moab and to curse Israel.
- F. Balaam answered that he could not go beyond the word of the Lord.
 - 1. This should have settled the matter.
 - 2. Balaam already knew the will of God.
 - 3. However, he was enticed by the promise of riches and honor.
 - 4. Thus, he decided to see if God might allow him to go anyway.
- G. God granted Balaam permission to go with the men, warning him not to go against His word.
 - 1. When men are determined to disobey, God allows them to exercise their free will.
 - 2. This does not mean that God had changed His mind about Balaam’s cursing Israel.
 - 3. Nor does it mean that God approved of Balaam’s desire and decision.
 - 4. In fact, God will use the actions of this rebellious man to proclaim the truth of His power and authority to the Gentile world.

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IV. The Anger of Jehovah

(Numbers 22:22-35)

- A. God was angry with Balaam because he chose to go with the men of Moab.
 - 1. This confirms that God did not approve of Balaam's actions, though He allowed them.
 - 2. In fact, this story demonstrates the patience and longsuffering of God even with rebellious men.
- B. Because of His anger – and His mercy – God stood in the way to hinder Balaam from his error – though He would not override his free will.
 - 1. The presence of the angel of the Lord was a sign that Balaam was under the condemnation of God and ready for judgment.
 - 2. However, His presence was also a means of hindering Balaam from the deadly path that he was following.
 - 3. At times, God closes doors in an attempt to turn man from error and back to righteousness.
- C. Balaam rode upon a donkey as he journeyed with his two servants.
- D. The donkey was able to see the angel of the Lord and sought to turn out of the way.
- E. Balaam, unable to see the angel, became angry and beat the animal.
 - 1. There is an important lesson in the actions of Balaam and his donkey.
 - 2. An animal was able to be turned back to the right path by the discipline of man.
 - 3. A man refused to be turned back to the right path by the discipline of God.
- F. As they journeyed further, they came to a vineyard where the donkey could not turn out of the path; so, she crushed Balaam's foot against the wall.
- G. Again, Balaam smote his donkey.
- H. Finally, they came to a narrow place where the donkey had nowhere to go; so, she fell down under Balaam.
- I. Once again, Balaam became angry and struck the animal.
 - 1. Note that Balaam became angry when he was kept from carrying out his own willful desires.
 - 2. Note that his anger was manifest in abuse toward the one who was attempting to protect and save him.
 - 3. Understand that this demonstrates his true attitude toward God.
 - 4. Balaam wanted to serve both God and mammon – but, ultimately, he came to love one and hate the other (cf. Matt. 6:24).
- J. As a result of Balaam's behavior, God opened the donkey's mouth and allowed her to speak.
 - 1. This is an amazing miracle, but no greater than any other recorded in Scripture.
 - 2. Again, the message is clear – God could speak through a dumb, stubborn animal or He could speak through a rebellious, stubborn man!
- K. The donkey explained the situation to Balaam and then the Lord opened his eyes – allowing Balaam to see the angel with his sword drawn.
- L. After hearing the words of the Lord, Balaam confessed, "I have sinned" – yet, he did not change his heart or his attitude toward his evil desire (cf. Exo. 9:27; 10:16-17; Josh. 7:20; 1 Sam. 15:24, 30; 26:21; 2 Sam. 12:13; 24:10, 17; Matt. 27:4-5; Luke 15:18, 21).
- M. Again, God emphasized that if Balaam went to Moab he would not be able to curse the people of Israel – only to speak the words that were given him by God.

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V. The Words of Balaam

(Numbers 23 – 24)

A. 23:1-13 – Balaam’s First Prophecy

1. Balaam’s use of 7 altars and sacrifices shows that he was still trying to “seek for enchantments” – use ‘magic’ to come in contact with God.
2. In spite of his errors, God did meet with Balaam and put a word in his mouth.
3. Balaam began by stating the purpose for which he had been summoned by Balak – to curse and to defy (denounce, threaten) Israel.
4. However, it was not possible for him to curse one whom God had not cursed.
5. Instead, Balaam began to describe the uniqueness and blessedness of Israel.
6. Israel dwelt alone and was not reckoned or counted among the nations of the world.
 - a. This indicates that the people of Israel were the chosen nation of God.
 - b. Israel was separate from the world – morally and religiously.
 - c. Thus, they were also to keep themselves separate physically.
 - d. This principle will become vitally important in chapter 25.
7. The innumerable host of Israel was proof of God’s blessing and faithfulness (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 13:16; 22:17; etc.).
8. Balaam ended his message by exclaiming his desire to “die the death of the righteous.”
 - a. Perhaps this refers to the patriarchs who gave rise to the nation of Israel – especially Abraham.
 - b. If so, Balaam’s wish was for God’s blessings upon himself and his descendants that his legacy might continue on after his death.
 - c. Perhaps this refers to the people of Israel themselves.
 - d. If so, Balaam’s wish was to be blessed by God like the nation of Israel.
9. Though Balaam wanted to “die the death of the righteous,” he did not want to live the life of the righteous – he only wanted the blessings, not the sacrifice.
10. Balak was upset with Balaam’s words and sought to take him to another place where he might curse the children of Israel.

B. 23:14-27 – Balaam’s Second Prophecy

1. Balak and Balaam moved to the field of Zophim (“watchers”), a lookout position on Mount Pisgah – from whence more of the Israelite host could be seen.
2. Again, seven altars were built and sacrifices offered as Balaam sought to hear from God.
3. Again, God “put a word in his mouth” and Balaam began by urging Balak to pay close attention to what he would say.
4. He needed to understand that God had not changed His mind about what He had commanded or promised.
 - a. He would still bless Israel.
 - b. He would not change His message, no matter how many times Balaam asked.
 - c. This was a lesson Balaam should have learned earlier (cf. Ch. 22).
5. God did not see worthlessness or trouble in Israel – as a result of sin, for their sins were forgiven – thus, there was no need to curse them.
6. Instead, God dwelt among them and there was jubilation over their King.
7. Because God protected them, no ‘magic’ or ‘spell’ against them would work.

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8. Instead, Israel would rise up like a lion and conquer all her enemies (cf. Gen. 49:9).
 9. When Balaam ended his words, Balak asked him not to say anything at all!
 10. Still, he sought to take Balaam to another place to try again.
- C. 23:28 – 24:14 – Balaam’s Third Prophecy
1. Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, a mountain which housed a place of worship for Baal – Beth-Peor (“house of Peor” [Deut. 3:29; 4:46; 34:6; Josh. 13:20]) and Baal-Peor (“lord of Peor” [Num. 25:3, 5]).
 2. The word ‘Jeshimon’ means, “Wilderness, waste, desolation, or desert.”
 3. After building altars and offering sacrifices, Balaam realized that God was pleased to bless Israel – a fact he should have known much sooner.
 4. As he looked upon the encampment of Israel, he spoke by inspiration – proclaiming the glory of the people of God.
 5. He saw Israel abundantly blessed by God – spreading out like valleys watered by brooks, gardens by streams (cf. Psalm 1).
 6. Their posterity would grow into a great nation and a mighty kingdom.
 7. The strength of God would preserve and protect Israel against all enemies.
 8. Balaam ended this parable by referring back to God’s promise to Abraham.
 9. Again, Balak was angry with Balaam and told him to return to his home.
 10. Balaam said that he would go, but, first, he would deliver one final message about the future of Israel.
- D. 24:15-25 – Balaam’s Fourth Prophecy
1. This prophecy looks all the way forward to the “latter days” – the days of the Messiah.
 2. The things Balaam saw would come to pass, but not immediately.
 3. The Star that would come out of Jacob was Jesus the Messiah (cf. Matt. 2; Luke 1:78; 2 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 22:16).
 4. The Scepter that would rise out of Israel was also Jesus (Gen. 49:10; Psa. 45:6; 110:2; Isa. 9:7; Luke 1:32-33; Heb. 1:8). {*The word for ‘scepter’ can also mean “staff,” “rod,” or “branch.”*}
 5. The Messiah would defeat and possess all nations – by the preaching of the Gospel in all the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; etc.).
 6. The Star and the Scepter would also have dominion – as a King (cf. Psa. 2; Isa. 11:10; Mic. 5:2-4; Heb. 1:8; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 19:16; etc.).
 7. Finally, Balaam exclaims, “Who shall live when God does this!” (Cf. Mal. 3:2)
 8. Balaam showed that God had a plan that had been put into motion and that He would accomplish His purpose in bringing the Messiah into the world.
- E. After his final words, Balaam and Balak went their separate ways.
- F. However, this was not the end of Balaam’s interactions with Balak or with Israel.
- G. In fact, he would become a source of great problems for the people of God.