

King Balak of Moab Hires Balaam to Curse Israel

Numbers 22

Numbers 22 - *"Then the children of Israel moved, and camped in the plains of Moab on the side of the Jordan across from Jericho. ² Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³ And Moab was exceedingly afraid of the people because they were many, and Moab was sick with dread because of the children of Israel. ⁴ So Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this company will lick up everything around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field." And Balak the son of Zippor was king of the Moabites at that time. ⁵ Then he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor at Pethor, which is near the River in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying: "Look, a people has come from Egypt. See, they cover the face of the earth, and are settling next to me! ⁶ Therefore please come at once, curse this people for me, for they are too mighty for me. Perhaps I shall be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land, for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."*

⁷ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the diviner's fee in their hand, and they came to Balaam and spoke to him the words of Balak. ⁸ And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam.

⁹ Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ So Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, ¹¹ 'Look, a people has come out of Egypt, and they cover the face of the earth. Come now, curse them for me; perhaps I shall be able to overpower them and drive them out.'" ¹² And God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed."

¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, "Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you." ¹⁴ And the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak, and said, "Balaam refuses to come with us." ¹⁵ Then Balak again sent princes, more numerous and more honorable than they. ¹⁶ And they came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: 'Please let nothing hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will certainly honor you greatly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Therefore please come, curse this people for me.'"

¹⁸ Then Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the word of the LORD my God, to do less or more. ¹⁹ Now therefore, please, you also stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me." ²⁰ And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men come to call you, rise and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you—that you shall do." ²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the princes of Moab.

²² Then God's anger was aroused because he went, and the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way as an adversary against him. And he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him.

²³ Now the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand, and the donkey turned aside out of the way and went into the field. So Balaam struck the donkey to turn her back onto the road.

²⁴ Then the Angel of the LORD stood in a narrow path between the vineyards, with a wall on this side and a wall on that side. ²⁵ And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she pushed herself against the wall and crushed Balaam's foot against the wall; so he struck her again. ²⁶ Then the Angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place where

there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. ²⁷ And when the donkey saw the Angel of the LORD, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam's anger was aroused, and he struck the donkey with his staff.

²⁸ Then the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey, and she said to Balaam, "What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?" ²⁹ And Balaam said to the donkey, "Because you have abused me. I wish there were a sword in my hand, for now I would kill you!" ³⁰ So the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden, ever since I became yours, to this day? Was I ever disposed to do this to you?" And he said, "No."

³¹ Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the Angel of the LORD standing in the way with His drawn sword in His hand; and he bowed his head and fell flat on his face. ³² And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "Why have you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out to stand against you, because your way is perverse before Me. ³³ The donkey saw Me and turned aside from Me these three times. If she had not turned aside from Me, surely I would also have killed you by now, and let her live."

³⁴ And Balaam said to the Angel of the LORD, "I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back." ³⁵ Then the Angel of the LORD said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but only the word that I speak to you, that you shall speak." So Balaam went with the princes of Balak.

³⁶ Now when Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the border at the Arnon, the boundary of the territory. ³⁷ Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not earnestly send to you, calling for you? Why did you not come to me? Am I not able to honor you?" ³⁸ And Balaam said to Balak, "Look, I have come to you! Now, have I any power at all to say anything? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak." ³⁹ So Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kirjath Huzoth. ⁴⁰ Then Balak offered oxen and sheep, and he sent some to Balaam and to the princes who were with him. So it was, the next day, that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, that from there he might observe the extent of the people."

Background Notes

Numbers 22-24 is the account of Balak and Balaam. Balak was the pagan king of Moab. Israel had already conquered the Amorite kingdoms of King Sihon of Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan, so Balak thought that the Moabites would be next in line to experience defeat at the hands of the increasingly powerful Israeli army. But King Balak didn't know that God had told Israel not to conquer Moab, because the Moabites (like the Ammonites) were descendants of Lot, and thus they were distant relatives of Israel. Balak was unaware of this communication from God to His people, so he hired Balaam to curse Israel. However, rather than cursing Israel, Balaam ended up blessing them!

Now comes the question: was Balaam a "good guy" or a "bad guy"? On the one hand, Balaam blessed Israel at God's command, but on the other hand, Balak certainly would not have hired Balaam to curse Israel if Balaam was a prophet of the one true God. Balaam was a well-known soothsayer or sorcerer from Mesopotamia, near the Euphrates River (Joshua 13:22). Balaam hired himself out to curse people for money, and this was **not** a characteristic of a good guy!

The New Testament Scriptures that mention Balaam certainly don't commend him as a good guy. He's mentioned in a denunciation of false teachers in 2 Peter 2:15-16: *"They have left the right way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Bezer,^[1] who loved the wages of wickedness. ¹⁶ But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey—an*

animal without speech—who spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.” Jude mentions him: “Woe to them! ...they have rushed for profit into Balaam's error” (v11). He is also mentioned in a negative way in Revelation 2:14, in the letter to Pergamum: “But I have a few things against you, because you have there those who hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit sexual immorality.”

So my opinion (for what it's worth!) is that Balaam was a false prophet. The typical diviner or sorcerer of that day would normally have used occult powers, and would normally use those powers for material gain. Even though God spoke to Balaam, and even though Balaam at least partially obeyed the Lord, and even though he blessed Israel and prophesied truth under the power of the Spirit of God (as we'll see in the chapters ahead), yet because of the New Testament Scriptures, and the factors that we've mentioned, I believe Balaam was a false prophet.

Doctrinal Points

1. The enemy will try to prevent God from blessing His people.

Balak could see that the children of Israel were blessed by their God, both in their numbers and in their victories over their enemies. Balak knew that his army, even combined with the Midianite forces, was no match for Israel, and so he came up with the plan to hire a sorcerer to curse God's people.

What a spiritual picture of the tactics of the enemy of our souls! Satan hates to see God's people enjoying God's blessing, and so he tries everything he can to thwart God's purpose of blessing His people. Just as Balak was persistent in trying to get Israel cursed, so Satan is persistent in trying to prevent God's blessing upon us. The enemy will try to prevent God from blessing His people.

2. The enemy cannot prevent God from blessing His people.

When God wants to bless His people, nothing can stop Him! This was true for Israel, and it's true for us. Balak was willing to pay a large sum of money to Balaam if he would curse Israel, and there's no doubt that Balaam wanted the money - but God prevented Balaam from cursing Israel. In fact, God forced Balaam to bless Israel in spite of himself!

Even though Balaam was a false prophet, he recognized that the God of Israel was supreme over the “gods” of the other nations. However, he was hoping that perhaps Israel's God would allow him to curse Israel. After all, Balaam must have known that this large mass of people had been wandering around in the wilderness for forty years. It seemed that Israel's God was not pleased with them! So just maybe, Balaam likely thought, just maybe will the powerful God, this Jehovah or Yahweh of Israel, allow me to use my powers to curse this wandering nation?

We can certainly see Satan's attempts to curse God's people through Balaam. What Balaam didn't know is that, even though God may discipline His people, He doesn't curse them – then or today. In fact, God **always blesses** His people. God's purpose, even when He must discipline His people, is to pave the way for His blessing!

Nothing can stop God from blessing His people, and God can use anything that He wants to thwart the enemy's attempt to curse God's people - even humble animals like donkeys! This part of the account would be humorous if it wasn't so serious, right? What would you do if you hit a donkey with a stick, and the animal turned around to you and said, "Why did you hit me? What have I ever done to you to deserve this?" I would have probably fainted in shock! But not Balaam! He actually argued with the donkey! Can you believe it? The truth is that God allowed the donkey to see the Angel of the Lord, and allowed the donkey to speak! Then He opened Balaam's eyes to see the Angel of the Lord. God was protecting His people so that He could bless them. The enemy can't prevent God from blessing His people.

Practical Application

You must do more than just say, "I have sinned."

The Angel of the Lord confronted Balaam in verse 34: *"And Balaam said to the Angel of the LORD, 'I have sinned, for I did not know You stood in the way against me. Now therefore, if it displeases You, I will turn back.'"* It sounds like Balaam became a believer, doesn't it? He acknowledged his sin and was willing to go back home. But Balaam never really committed himself to the Lord. We know this from what we read of him in the rest of the book of Numbers, and the places where he is mentioned in the New Testament.

Just acknowledging that you're a sinner and that you've sinned doesn't make you a Christian! Lots of unbelievers are willing to say that. And following the moral teachings of the Bible doesn't make you a Christian! Many unbelievers will even follow the moral teachings of the Bible. To become a Christian, you must believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for your sins as your personal substitute on the cross, and you must personally accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your own Savior. You must do **more** than just say, "I have sinned."