

## November 22, 2020

### *Balaam's Talking Donkey*

### Numbers 22

#### BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

Nov 15 Acts 7-8	Nov 19 Acts 16-17
Nov 16 Acts 9-10	Nov 20 Acts 18-20
Nov 17 Acts 11-13	Nov 21 Acts 21-23
Nov 18 Acts 14-15	Nov 22 Acts 24-26

**Lesson Idea:** God's people should only go where God directs us and speak only the Word He gives us.

#### Background:

As the time in the wilderness drew to a close, Israel moved into their final camping site *in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho*. Their presence worried the people of Moab, because they feared Israel would defeat them and take their land. They knew that Israel had a powerful God who had delivered them from Egypt and brought them recent victories over other nations in the region. King Balak of Moab decided to try to hire a prophet to try to counteract their spiritual power by cursing them.

This week we will focus on chapter 22 where Balaam receives Balak's invitation, but God makes it plain that He will not allow a curse on Israel. Next week, we will look at the rest of the story by examining some of Balaam's prophecies about Israel. We will also see how Balaam negatively influenced Israel and how the New Testament judges him.

#### Foundational Truths

- We need to be obedient to the Lord's call on our lives.
- Just knowing what the Lord says does not guarantee that we are walking in step with Him.
- God opposes us when we proceed against His plans.
- The Lord needs to open our eyes to see spiritual things.
- We need to speak only what the Lord desires.

#### Numbers 22:1-21

#### Questions to Ponder:

- V 1-5 Why was Balak frightened of the Israelites?
- V 6-7 What kind of confidence did Balak have in Balaam?

- V 8 What did Balaam initially agree to do?
- V 9 Why did God ask Balaam who the men were?
- V 10-14 What was God's command and why?
- V 15-21 How did the situation change?

#### **Numbers 22:1-21**

*1 Then the sons of Israel journeyed on, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.*

*2 Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. 3 So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel. 4 Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will eat up all that is around us, as the ox eats up the grass of the field!" And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. 5 So he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the Euphrates River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call for him, saying, "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they have covered the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. 6 Now, therefore, **please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I will 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 left with the **fees for divination** in their hands; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. 8 And he said to them, "Spend the night here, and **I will bring word back to you just as the Lord may speak to me.**" And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. 9 Then God came to Balaam and said, "**Who are these men with you?**" 10 Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, sent word to me: 11 'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt, and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I will be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" 12 **But God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.**" 13 So Balaam got up in the morning and said to Balak's representatives, "Go back to your land, for **the Lord has refused to let me go with you.**" 14 And the representatives from Moab got up and went to Balak, and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."*

*15 Then Balak sent representatives once again, more numerous and more distinguished than the previous. 16 They came to Balaam and said to him, "This is what Balak the son of Zippor says: 'I beg you, let nothing keep*

you from coming to me; 17 for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you tell me. Please come then, curse this people for me.” 18 But Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, **“Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the Lord my God.** 19 Now please, you also stay here tonight, and **I will find out what else the Lord will say to me.** 20 And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, **“If the men have come to call you, rise and go with them; but you shall do only the thing that I tell you.”**

21 So Balaam arose in the morning, saddled his donkey, and went with the leaders of Moab.

#### **Notes:**

Verse 1 says that Israel had arrived at the plains of Moab just opposite of Jericho (which would be the first place they would attack in the Promised Land). All of Moab feared the Israelites because of their number and because they had heard how they powerfully came out of Egypt. Balak sent a message to Balaam saying that the people of Israel were “too mighty” for him to defeat. The word for “mighty” can mean either “strong” or “numerous.” Both were true. In Exodus 15 Moses sang about the fear that Moab and other nations felt after the Egyptian army was crushed in the Red Sea:

#### **Exodus 15:13-19**

13 In Your faithfulness You have led the people whom You have redeemed;

In Your strength You have guided them to Your holy habitation.

14 The peoples have heard, they tremble;  
Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia.

15 Then the chiefs of Edom were terrified;

**The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them;**

All the inhabitants of Canaan have despaired.

16 **Terror and dread fall upon them;**

By the greatness of Your arm they are motionless as stone,

Until Your people pass over, Lord,

Until the people pass over whom You have purchased.

17 You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance,

The place, Lord, which You have made as Your dwelling,

The sanctuary, Lord, which Your hands have established.

18 The Lord shall reign forever and ever.”

19 For the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, and the Lord brought

back the waters of the sea on them, but the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea.

Balak had a great amount of confidence in Balaam who had a reputation for being able to bless or curse people. Apparently Balaam was a prophet for hire, because Balak sent him a “divination fee” (v 7). Peter Naylor in the *New Bible Commentary on Numbers* reminds us of what was at stake:

First, Balak’s message announces the issue at stake: Is Israel blessed or cursed? His words to Balaam, ‘For I know that those you bless are blessed, and those you curse are cursed’ (6) recall God’s promise to Abraham, *And I will bless you... I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse* (Gn. 12:2-3; cf. Gn. 27:33). Thus, Balak’s words alert us to the fact that God’s covenant purpose is now on trial. Balak called the false prophet, renowned for the power of his curses, to contradict God’s blessing. The central message of these chapters is thus set in sharp relief: God’s blessing is irrevocable. The whole episode is important for this one reason: God’s blessing was confirmed in the mouth of a dreadful enemy (12).

Balaam agreed to seek the Lord on behalf of Balak and Moab. It is interesting that he uses the covenant name for God in verse 8 (*Yahweh* [יְהוָה]). He apparently does have some kind of relationship with God, because God converses with him during the night. In verse 9 God came to Balaam and asked who the men were that came to him. Since God is omniscient (all-knowing), He never asks a question that He does not know the answer. His purpose in the question then was to get Balaam to analyze what his own purposes would be—to go with men who would make him profitable or to take seriously his prophetic office and recognize Yahweh as the true One who can bless or curse. God told him not to go with the entourage from Moab, because the people they wanted to curse had been blessed by God. Balaam told the men that Yahweh refused to let him go with them.

Balak did not give up easily though and offered to give great honor to Balaam, as well as anything else Balaam wanted to ask from him. Balaam agreed to seek the Lord again, even though God had made it plain that He would not permit Balaam to curse Israel. During the night, God said to Balaam: **“If the men have come to call you, rise and go with them; but you shall do only the thing that I tell you.”** Balaam must have been excited to hear that, because verse 21 intimates that he wasted no time and left as soon as he woke up the next morning. But the

next verses will demonstrate that God was upset that Balaam wanted to go.

### Numbers 22:22-35 A Warrior Angel, Talking Donkey, and Disobedient Prophet

#### Questions to Ponder:

- V 22 Why was God angry with Balaam, and what did He do about it?
- V 23-27 What happened between the angel, Balaam, and his donkey?
- V 28-30 What happened when the Lord opened the donkey's mouth?
- V 31-34 What happened when the Lord opened Balaam's eyes?
- V 35 How did the angel respond to Balaam's repentance?

#### Numbers 22:22-35

22 But God was angry that he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the road as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey, and his two servants were with him. 23 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord standing in the road with his sword drawn in his hand, the donkey turned off from the road and went into the field; and Balaam struck the donkey to guide her back onto the road. 24 Then the angel of the Lord stood in a narrow path of the vineyards, with a stone wall on this side and on that side. 25 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she pressed herself against the wall and pressed 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 to the right or to the left. 27 When the donkey saw the angel of the Lord, she lay down under Balaam; so Balaam was angry and 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, "It is because you have made a mockery of me! If only there had been a sword in my hand! For I would have killed you by now!" 30 But the donkey said to Balaam, "Am I not your donkey on which you have ridden all your life to this day? Have I ever been in the habit of doing such a thing 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 sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed all the way to the ground. 32 The angel of the Lord said to him, "Why have

you struck your donkey these three times? Behold, I have come out as an adversary, because your way was contrary to me. 33 But the donkey saw me and turned aside from me these three times. If she had not turned aside from me, I would surely have killed you just now, and let her live." 34 Balaam said to the angel of the Lord, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing in the way against me. Now then, if it is displeasing to you, I will turn back." 35 But the angel of the Lord said to Balaam, "Go with the men, but you shall speak only the word which I tell you." So Balaam went along with the leaders of Balak.

<sup>36</sup> When Balak heard that Balaam was coming, he went out to meet him at the city of Moab, which is on the Arnon border, at the extreme end of the border. <sup>37</sup> Then Balak said to Balaam, "Did I not urgently send to you to call you? Why did you not come to me? Am I really unable to honor you?" <sup>38</sup> So Balaam said to Balak, "Behold, I have come now to you! Am I able to speak anything at all? The word that God puts in my mouth, that I shall speak." <sup>39</sup> And Balaam went with Balak, and they came to Kiriath-huzoth. <sup>40</sup> Balak sacrificed oxen and sheep, and sent some to Balaam and the leaders who were with him.

<sup>41</sup> Then it came about in the morning that Balak took Balaam and brought him up to the high places of Baal, and he saw from there a portion of the people.

#### Notes:

Although God had given Balaam permission to go with the men of Moab (v 21), He was not pleased; in fact, verse 23 says that He was angry about it. This begs the question of whether God was upset that Balaam sought the Lord a second time after God had told him not to go with the men when he first asked. God sometimes permits things that He does not prefer. One of the recurring themes of Numbers is that we share in the blessing of God when we walk in obedience to His purposes; but we always suffer consequences for our disobedience and selfishness. God sent an angel to *take "his stand in the road as an adversary against"* Balaam. The verb expressing God's anger carries the idea of kindling a fire or a burning wrath. The word for adversary is the same root word for "satan," meaning the angel became a supernatural enemy or adversary to Balaam. **Hebrews 10:26-31** reminds us that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

26 *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of*

*judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. 28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." 31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Balaam's donkey could see the angel who was prepared to kill Balaam and avoided him. Balaam, not aware of the danger, beat his donkey each time that he swerved to avoid the angel. On the third occasion, "the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey," and she confronted Balaam for striking her. It seems that Balaam was so frustrated that he failed to see the oddity that his donkey had begun to speak. Instead he entered into a conversation with her. He felt that his donkey had **made a mockery** of him. In other words, he was embarrassed that the men with him would think that he could not handle his donkey. That seemed to be more important to him than what the Lord thought of him. The donkey reminded him of her faithfulness to Balaam throughout his life. But it wasn't until **the Lord opened Balaam's eyes** that he saw the angel with his drawn sword.

We are reminded that without the Lord's aid, we are unable to see spiritual things. In **1 Corinthians 2:14-16** Paul tells us:

*14 The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. 15 The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, 16 for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.*

In verse 32, the angel told Balaam that his way was **contrary** to the Lord. The word carries the idea of **reckless** or **perverse**. Balaam felt he had the permission of the Lord to go, but God judged his motives as perverse and contrary to the Lord's will. God knew what was in Balaam's heart and opposed it.

Balaam confessed his **sin** (v 34) and demonstrated his repentance by volunteering to go back home. The angel told him to continue on his journey, but to make sure he

only spoke the words that the messenger of the Lord would give to him. Balaam promised he would and even told Balak that he could not speak anything except "**the word God puts in my mouth.**" (v 38)

As followers of Jesus we should remember that we are called to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8) and His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). Because He is our Lord we do not have the right to decide to go wherever we want and do whatever we desire. *We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which He has prepared beforehand* (Ephesians 2:10). Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 4:10-11:

*10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 11 If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and power for ever and ever.*

**Speak the very words of God this week to someone. Don't wait for a donkey to have more spiritual insight than you.**

**As we are about to move into the Thanksgiving season, remember to be thankful that God makes His will and ways known to us. Also thank Him for His grace and His unbreakable promises to us, which are all "yes" and "amen" in Christ Jesus.**

**We will look at the Prophecies of Balaam next week, including a prophecy concerning the birth of Christ. We will also examine his eventual demise and spiritual legacy.**

Bro Stan