



BALAAM AND A TALKING DONKEY

Numbers 21:10–25:18

The opposition to God’s chosen people Israel came in many forms. The same is true for us. Our enemy continually seeks opportunities to discredit, distract, and destroy us. We can never rest in our successes and let our guards down.

As we sail from chapters 21 through 25 of the book of Numbers in our Wisdom Journey, we are going to see some impressive military victories for the new generation of Israel.

Standing between the Israelites and the land of Canaan—the promised land—are the hostile nations known as the Amorites and the Moabites. Now the Israelites aren’t looking to pick a fight with these nations; they just want to pass through their territory along the way. We are told in verse 21 that “Israel sent messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, saying, ‘Let me pass through your land.’”

Sihon answers this peaceful request by getting his army ready to fight. But verse 24 records, “Israel defeated [Sihon] with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land.”

Then from farther north in Bashan comes a king by the name of Og—even his name sounds menacing, doesn’t it? Well, this wicked king, Og, comes out to fight the Israelites. But in verse 35, we read again, “[Israel] defeated him and his sons and all his people.” And with that, Israel now has control of much of the land east of the Jordan River.



Figurine of man on donkey reminiscent of Balaam

But this is no time to bask in their victories and hand out trophies. They need to stay on the alert because watching all this are the Moabites.

Now in chapter 22, we read in verses 2-3, “Balak [Moab’s king] saw all that Israel had done to the Am-



orites. And Moab . . . was overcome with fear of the people of Israel.”

Let me tell you, Balak, could have begged God for forgiveness and left the people of Israel alone. Instead, supported by his allies the Midianites, he goes after a well-known pagan prophet—a practitioner of the dark arts—a man who dabbles in the occult; his name is Balaam.

And Balak sends a wagon load of money to Balaam, along with messengers to tell him here in verse 6, “Come . . . [and] curse this people for me, since they are too mighty for me.” He wants Balaam to use his devilish power to put a curse on Israel.

Now beloved, this doesn’t mean some voodoo practitioner can put some kind of curse on you and ruin your life or exercise some secret power over you. Let me tell you, the powers of darkness are real. but they are on a leash and can do nothing apart from God’s permission. Remember, the Bible tells us, “He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

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Balaam is smart enough to know that Israel belongs to the true and living God. And so, he asks God for His direction. We’re not told how God communicates to Balaam; we’re just told Balaam gets the message that there’s no need to try to put a curse on Israel. God says to him here in verse 12, “You shall not go with them [the Moabites]. You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

So, Balaam refuses Balak’s offer and sends this committee home. But King Balak is not going to give up so easily; so, he sweetens the pot and effectively sends

Balaam a blank check. He’s saying, “You name the price, and we’ll pay it.”

This time the Lord tells Balaam, “Go with them; but only do what I tell you” (verse 20). Balaam, however, is secretly motivated by the allure of all this money. Other passages of Scripture tell us the Lord was angered by Balaam’s greed (2 Peter 2:15). So, the Lord sends Balaam a warning—and it’s delivered in a rather unusual way. Look at verse 22: “The angel of the LORD took his stand in the way as [Balaam’s] adversary. Now he was riding on the donkey.”

Balaam doesn’t see the angel, but verse 23 tells us that *his donkey* sees “the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with a drawn sword in his hand.” The donkey tries to avoid the angel, but every time he moves to the right or left, Balaam smacks him with a stick.

Finally, the terrified donkey just lies down in the middle of the road. God then miraculously gives the donkey a voice, and the donkey says to Balaam, “‘What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times?’ And Balaam said to the donkey, ‘Because you have made a fool of me’” (verses 28–29). Balaam is actually arguing with a donkey without stopping to say, “Hey wait, this donkey is talking to me!” I think Balaam’s head was thicker than the donkey’s.

In verse 31 we read:

Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way . . . And [Balaam] . . . fell on his face.

The Lord repeats His message in verse 35, “Go with the men, but speak only the word that I tell you.” That message seems to finally get through, because when he comes to Balak in verse 38, Balaam says, “The word that God puts in my mouth, that must I speak.” In other words, he’s going to be as smart as that donkey was and speak only the word that God puts in his mouth.



Now in chapters 23 and 24, Balaam is taken to three different locations by this Moabite king who is trying everything he can to get Balaam to curse Israel. But every time, Balaam refuses and instead speaks words of blessing God has placed in his mouth.

In fact, God uses Balaam to offer some amazing truths about God and His chosen people Israel.

For instance, here in chapter 23 and verse 19, Balaam says, “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.”

But most amazing is the statement he makes in chapter 24 as he prophesies of the coming Savior, saying in verse 17, “A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” The King—as indicated by a royal scepter—will one day rise from the sons of Jacob—that is, from the nation of Israel.

So, God uses both a donkey and a false prophet to communicate His message!

Now the tragedy here is that while Balaam is unable to curse Israel, he introduces Balak to another strategy to defeat God’s chosen people. And this ends up being more successful than some kind of hocus-pocus, phony curse.

Chapter 25 opens with that strategy:

The people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods.

Some of the Israelite men begin immoral relationships with the women of Moab and accept their invitation to engage in their idolatrous feasts and worship. Numbers 31:16 reveals that this was instigated by Balaam,

and we read in Revelation 2:14 that Balaam “put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.”

Israel’s rebellion is so severe we’re told here in Numbers 25 that God orders the execution of these immoral men, and He sends a plague among the people to bring them to repentance.

There’s a lasting lesson here. Our study began in chapter 21 with obedience and victory, and by the time we reach chapter 25 Israel is disobedient and defeated.

This is a warning to every believer today. The devil is relentless. When one strategy fails, he tries another one. Let’s walk with God today.

How would you describe Balaam’s heart? How should we relate to people who share his spiritual perspective and at the same time fulfill our mandate to make disciples for Jesus? (Matthew 28:18-20). Who is the “Balaam” in your life?

What attributes of God are highlighted when He uses even wickedness to bring about His own glory? How might you use the Balaam events to explain to an unbeliever how God relates to wickedness and why He is worthy of worship through faith in Jesus?

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